“Mother has arrived!”

History, Race, and Family as Vehicles in *RuPaul’s Drag Race*’s Legacy Building

Kata Kasala
Pro gradu -tutkielma
Sukupuolentutkimus
Humanistinen tiedekunta
Helsingin yliopisto
11/2020

HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

Tiedekunta/Osasto – Fakultet/Sektion – Faculty Humanistinen tiedekunta		
Tekijä – Författare – Author Kata Kasala		
Työn nimi – Arbetets titel – Title "Mother has arrived!" – History, Race, and Family as Vehicles in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s Legacy Building		
Oppiaine – Läroämne – Subject Sukupuolentutkimus		
Työn laji – Arbetets art – Level Pro gradu	Aika – Datum – Month and year 11/2020	Sivumäärä– Sidoantal – Number of pages 57

Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

This thesis focuses on the reality tv show *RuPaul's Drag Race* and its legacy building. The show is a popular competition show for professional drag queens. In this study I show how *RuPaul's Drag Race* engages in building a legacy of drag and posits itself as the ambassador of drag for mainstream audiences. The elements of this legacy building I analyze in this study are the show's version of history of drag in the USA and who fits in it; references to and appropriation of minority subcultures; employment and perpetuating of racializing stereotypes; and use of different types of family discourse.

I focused on 2014's *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6* as a case study. I conducted several rounds of close reading and watching of the season's 14 episodes, with corresponding episodes of the behind-the-scenes series *Untucked*, and transcribed relevant dialogue. For a more in-depth analysis of the show's referential nature of history writing, I included in my analysis the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* that is frequently referenced in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. To support my analysis of the role of family discourse in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building, I also analyzed selected promotional material for the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise that employs these discourses.

Based on close reading and watching of *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6*, *Paris Is Burning*, and the selected promotional material for *RuPaul's Drag Race* related products, and reflecting upon previous studies on drag in general and *RuPaul's Drag Race* in particular, I identified and analyzed prominent themes in the episodes, recurring elements in the show, individual contest assignments, and the show's panel of judges' critiques of the contestants' performances. I performed an in-depth analysis of the show's cast and the references that *RuPaul's Drag Race* makes to other cultural products and subcultures, from the point of view of narratives and discourses that I interpret as legacy building. Throughout this analysis, I kept language as one key focus.

My analysis of the language used in *RuPaul's Drag Race* is mainly informed by sociolinguistic studies on drag queens' use of language conducted by Barrett (1998), Mann (2011) and Simmons (2014). I analyze the narratives that arise in *RuPaul's Drag Race* concerning history writing and different traditions of drag, discussing with Shetina's 2018 study on queer citation and Schottmiller's 2017 study on camp referencing as queer memory in *RuPaul's Drag Race*. My analysis of the portrayal of racializing stereotypes and appropriation of minority subcultures in *RuPaul's Drag Race* discusses with hooks (1992), Strings and Bui (2014), and Rodriquez (2006). In my analysis of the different family discourses utilized by *RuPaul's Drag Race*, I refer to Arnold and Bailey's study on "houses" in ballroom culture (2009), and make use of the notion of queer chosen family (Hicks 2011).

I show in this study how, through referencing other cultural products like *Paris Is Burning*, *RuPaul's Drag Race* writes a version of the history of drag in the USA and appears as a keeper of this drag legacy and an educator of the audience on the history of drag; how this legacy includes gay men and largely excludes trans women; how different traditions of drag are portrayed through categorizations that introduce recognizable styles of drag to an outsider audience; how the show employs racializing stereotypes tailored to an outsider perspective of a presumed white audience and appropriates Black subcultures; and how Black street esthetics are used in the show for "authenticity" and "spice", so that providing white middle-class audiences with fresh material from marginalized cultures becomes part of the show's legacy. I also suggest that *RuPaul's Drag Race* encompasses the audience and the cast of the show in an apparatus of an imagined family as spectacle in a legacy that is fortified by promoting the 'code of sisterhood' (Simmons 2014) that delineates proper conduct for 'upholding drag family values', which the *RuPaul's Drag Race* franchise utilizes in a way that commodifies queer kinship.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
RuPaul's Drag Race, drag, LGBT history, queer history, queer culture, cultural appropriation, racialization, queer kinship

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited
Keskustakampuksen kirjasto

Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

RuPaul's Drag Race (*RPDR*) is a reality television competition show in the vein of *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway*, created and hosted by the legendary drag queen, top model, celebrity talk show host and recording artist RuPaul, for drag queen contestants. In this study I set out to chart the ingredients and methods of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building endeavors, focusing on 2014's *Season 6* as a case study. Through an in-depth analysis of *RPDR Season 6*, I make a layout of the version of the history of drag in the USA that the show promotes and who fits in it. I go on to show that *RPDR* appropriates racialized esthetics and subcultural phenomena and perpetuates racializing stereotypes, and utilizes different types of family discourse in the show and related products. I argue that all these aspects are integral parts of the show's legacy building. I also argue that through this legacy, the image that the show crafts for itself is that of the self-appointed ambassador of drag for mainstream U.S. audiences.

This study focuses on the specific narratives that *RuPaul's Drag Race* as a reality tv production and cultural phenomenon creates and disseminates concerning the past, present, and future of U.S. drag. The purpose of this study is not to "reveal" a "true history" of U.S. drag, or to somehow "prove wrong" the legacy of *RuPaul's Drag Race*. From an intersectional feminist point of view, there are many aspects to these narratives that call for critical inspection: gender, racialization, sexuality, class, citizenship, health status, and other minority aspects.

As a queer drag and performing arts enthusiast and queer activist, the intersections present in the show's production are perhaps more familiar and visible to me than to an average audience member. I hope to present my understanding of that culture in this study in a way that brings something of value not only to academic feminist scholars, but also to the viewing experience of those who watch *RuPaul's Drag Race* for the sake of its undeniable entertainment value.

Research on *RPDR* has been published in a slowly increasing volume since the 2010s. The studies have focused on gender (e.g. Edgar 2011; Gonzales and Cavazos 2016), language (e.g. Heller 2018; Moore 2013; Simmons 2014), race (e.g. Strings and Bui 2014), and some on cultural citation, like Schottmiller's Cultural and Performance Studies dissertation on the show's 'Camp capitalism' (2017) and how camp as 'a form of queer social memory' (ibid., 60) works in the show*, and Shetina's 2018 study on a recurring impersonation segment in the show. This thesis's focus on the show's legacy building through referential history writing, perpetuating racialized stereotypes, appropriating

minority subcultures, and employing different types of family discourse provides a new intersectional perspective of *RPDR* and its influentiality in queer culture of the 2020s.

RPDR premiered in 2009 on the LGBT-dedicated cable television network Logo TV. The show has been released by VH1 since 2017, and 2020 saw its 12th "regular" season. The franchise also includes a behind-the-scenes show, *Untucked*, which is aired in sync with the contest episodes during the regular seasons; an *All Stars* strand (a similar contest for a selection of *RPDR* contestants who did not win the season they originally participated in); and spinoff shows around the world, like *Drag Race Thailand*, *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, *Canada's Drag Race* and *Drag Race Holland*. A regular *RPDR* season is a 12-to-14-episode run where a number of professional drag queens compete for the winner's title of America's Next Drag Superstar and a grand prize consisting of a designer crown and scepter, sponsorship deals, tour headliner spots, and a cheque for $100,000.

The contest consists of episodes that each include a "challenge", an assignment where the contestants exhibit their prowess in different skills and traits, and are evaluated by a panel of judges (including celebrity guests) and most importantly, RuPaul herself. The judging posits the three "best" contestants of the episode in the Top Three, with usually one winner who gets a prize provided by the show's sponsors, and the two "worst" of the episode in the Bottom Two. These two contestants then deliver a lip-sync performance that RuPaul evaluates to decide which one is eliminated from the contest, and which one is saved by their extraordinary performance and gets to stay in the contest. This section is called Lip Sync For Your Life and it follows a "lip sync battle" format where the Bottom Two contestants perform simultaneously on the same stage. The performance is accompanied by a song that has been previously distributed to all contestants in production-provided mp3 players so that they all have the chance to prepare a performance in advance, in case they have to Lip Sync For Their Lives at the end of the judging.

When I set out to write this thesis, my initial main focus was drag slang usage in *RPDR*. In order to study that aspect of the show, I transcribed most of the dialogue in *Season 6* that contained slang. However, I noticed along the way many more aspects to the show that I wanted to analyze, so that an in-depth analysis of language use would not have left room for much more. I decided to widen my focus to encompass different elements in *RPDR*'s legacy building: the show's version of history of

---

* Despite my efforts at compiling an exhaustive bibliography, I discovered Schottmiller's dissertation only very late into the writing process of this thesis, so this study references Schottmiller's work mostly in the spirit of discussion. I applaud Schottmiller's ethnographic work in the field of "*Drag Race* studies", and look forward to reading more of Schottmiller's work.

drag in the USA, references to and appropriation of minority subcultures, employment of racializing stereotypes, and family discourse. In my analysis, I have approached these aspects of legacy building first and foremost through language, widening the scope to narratives and representation.

I chose to analyze *Season 6* in this study because of the themes that arose in that season, with an outspoken focus on the history of drag in the USA, different types of drag that the contestants represent, and the legacy of the show. The 1990 hit documentary directed by Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning,* has been frequently referenced in the course of the show's runtime. Since it is explicitly brought to the front in *Season 6*, an important element in this study is an in-depth analysis of the position of *Paris Is Burning* (*PIB*) in queer and mainstream popular culture, and the ways the documentary is referenced in *RPDR*. With the inclusion of the documentary on the late 1980s New York City ballroom scene and its focus on "houses", more or less family-like units in the ballroom scene, the prominence of different kinds of family-related discourse in *RPDR* also becomes more visible and receives specific attention in my analysis in chapter 4. In order to look deeper into the legacy building and family discourse aspects, I have included in my analysis a selection of promotional videos for *RPDR* and the franchise's fan convention, DragCon.

As a basis for my analysis, I have watched all 14 episodes of *RPDR Season 6* and the corresponding behind-the-scenes episodes of *Untucked* several times, while transcribing relevant parts of the dialogue and charting the structure of the episodes and the whole season. Based on close watching and reading of *RPDR Season 6*, and reflecting upon previous studies on drag in general and *RPDR* in particular, I have identified and analyzed prominent themes in the episodes, the recurring elements in the show, the individual challenges, and performed an in-depth analysis of the cast of the show and the references that *RPDR* makes to other prominent cultural products, from the point of view of narratives and discourses. Throughout this study, the focus on language has largely guided my analysis.

Through this close reading, I have come to the conclusion that all the elements I have observed are part of *RPDR*'s deliberate endeavor to build and promote a specific legacy of drag, to appear as the keeper of this heritage in the present and carry it into the future, and to act as the ambassador of drag for the mainstream. This viewpoint catches important features of the show's cultural significance, and ties together many of the elements that have been previously studied individually.

My analysis of the themes, features and discourses employed in *RPDR* focuses on what the production has chosen to include in the show. All of the material seen in the show is selected and rearranged during the post-production process of omitting and editing. There is no way to determine

the relation or relevance of the contestants' stories or discussion to the reality outside the show. Because *RPDR* is a reality tv show, I am for the most part analyzing the contestants' actions in the show as characters that are built by the production through means of editing the contestants' dialogue and interview footage. I shall use the pronoun *she* for all the contestants unless they have specified otherwise, because they use that pronoun for each other in the show. The contestants' ages, where mentioned after their names, are from 2014 when *RPDR Season 6* aired.

As I show in chapter 2, the tradition of drag that *RPDR* is promoting has its roots in the New York City ballroom culture, documented in *Paris Is Burning*. This ballroom subculture is created and predominantly inhabited by LGBTQ+ people of color, mainly Black and Latinx (Bailey 2011, 367; Strings and Bui 2014, 823). Hence it is logical that much of the drag slang used in *RPDR* also springs from these sources, which aspect of the show I analyze in chapter 3.

The language used in the show is a significant and deliberate part of *RPDR*'s legacy. Drag slang is used in the show not only by the contestants, RuPaul, the judges and guests, but also by the production itself in many forms: scripted hosting monologues, episode and challenge names, written notes, marketing, and hashtags. The dialogue among the contestants that could be considered as "naturally occurring" is also in the hands of the production: what parts of non-scripted dialogue among real live speakers are shown in the final cut is a matter of editing.

Simmons argues (2014, 635) that 'the ways in which contestants encode and decode language carries specific cultural perspectives for this particular drag queen community, but also for the larger ''sisterhood'' of drag.' This speaks to the importance of language in the building of *RPDR*'s legacy. The drama among the contestants would lose much of its interest without the shared cultural references and the word artistry that requires both a knowledge how to interpret a remark, and the skill to follow it up with a proper comeback. The dialogue is edited into dynamic montages of glances, facial expressions, and finally bursts of aggression or relieved laughter. These montages inform the audience how to react to a remark, and thereby promise to initiate them in the secrets of drag culture and its lingo.

Edgar notes (2011, 136) that *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s frequent referencing of *Paris Is Burning* 'not only legitimates the queerness of the show in the queer historical continuum; it is also an attempt to equate the two in terms of social value.' In this study I show that like *Paris Is Burning* brought the ballroom scene behind voguing into mainstream consciousness in 1990, *RPDR* has seized the opportunity to concoct a selected blend of drag-related culture, with ballroom culture as one of the main esthetic ingredients, to serve for the mainstream. The historical approach that *RPDR* has taken

especially in *Season 6* positions the show in the role of an educator, and hereby allows it to assume an identity as both, the keeper of the history of drag, and an ambassador of drag for the mainstream.

The interactive format of the show as a reality tv elimination competition that also engages fans through social media further enhances *RPDR*'s position as an ambassador of drag for the mainstream: the audience is encouraged to share and use the language and the esthetics of the show in their own social media posts.

The appropriation of subcultures, in *RPDR*'s case specifically Black and Latinx, is theorized by bell hooks (1992) and Rodriquez (2006) as using elements of othered cultures as "spice" for white mainstream culture. In her 1992 essay on *Paris Is Burning*, hooks observes that

> this current trend in producing colorful ethnicity for the white consumer appetite [...] makes it possible for blackness to be commodified in unprecedented ways, and for whites to appropriate black culture without interrogating whiteness or showing concern for the displeasure of blacks.
> (hooks 1992, 153-154)

In this vein, I suggest that *RPDR*'s legacy building and mainstreaming endeavors include providing white, straight, middle-class audiences with fresh material from marginalized POC and LGBTQ cultures.

On gender and terminology

As a trans activist, I have treaded carefully throughout this study with regard to the historical continuum of trans culture that is interlinked with the drag and ballroom cultures. Terminology and conceptualization of gender have been in constant flux since the early ballroom scene days of the late 1960s, and there is a risk of superimposing current, white-European-originated definitions of gender onto POC of decades past and talking over them. I have been striving to respect the original testimonials I have come across, as I write as a white person from the perspective of 2020s Finland. Some of my sources for the history of the ballroom scene and drag in the USA are from an era of transphobic language use. I do not quote them directly and I refer to them with caution, but also with the knowledge that the language used in them is that of those people whose history I am looking at in this study.

In the U.S. in the 1960s through to the 1990s, LGBT culture as a whole was widely referred to as "gay". Trans rights were advocated for under "gay rights". Celebrated trans rights activists of color

Marsha P. Jonhson and Sylvia Rivera founded an organization called Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) in 1970. They were both self-identified “drag queens”, although today many identify them as trans women. These two are not mutually exclusive. House Mothers were sometimes also called gay mothers, even if they would today be considered straight trans women, and even if many of their “children” were straight trans women too (cf. Cunningham 1998).

Ryan notes in an interview essay (2016) that the ballroom scene as an inherently queer culture features a more nuanced conception of gender as opposed to the ‘mainstream idea of the trans/cis dichotomy, in which these two identities are presented as polar opposites with no overlap’. These nuances are embodied in the term “queen” that suggests a situationally and historically tied, ballroom-specific bond between “femme queens”, or transfeminine people, and “butch queens”, or gay men. Ryan ponders that ‘[b]ecause sexual desires and actions are themselves gendered, even the most masculine gay man is always dancing on the outskirts of cisgenderhood.’ (ibid.). When we add to this point of view the tendencies of white racist cultures to infantilize and feminize Black men (cf. hooks 1992), cisgender manhood appears to us as it is, a constructed norm based on hegemonic heterosexual masculinity that is also essentially white.

All of the above has nothing to do with individual cisgender or transgender identities. Identities cannot be assigned to anyone from the outside. A person who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth is cisgender, no matter what anyone else says.

Throughout history there have always been trans women who always were women and identified as such at all times, like there have always been trans men who always were men and identified as such at all times. Like there have always been people who transcend the imposed gender binary in different culture-specific ways; people whose stories have for centuries remained unheard by the colonial heteronormative cultural hegemony. The changing names and terms that people have used of themselves along the centuries and in different cultural settings speak to a less straightforward “objective truth” about historical individuals’ genders. Representation matters, as does historical accuracy. In striving for both historical accuracy and respect for the stories people tell of themselves, I welcome the ever-present uncertainty and ambiguity as tools to dismantle the colonial, repressive compulsory gender binary.

Thesis outline

In Chapter 2, I outline the In this chapter, I analyze different aspects of history writing in *RuPaul's Drag Race* and how the legacy of the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* manifests in the show. I demonstrate the contribution of language use, especially slang, to *RPDR*'s legacy building. I chart who is included and excluded in *RPDR*'s legacy of drag and deliver an analysis of the show's cast to show how different styles of drag are featured in *RPDR*'s legacy. In the final subchapter I analyze a video segment from the "Grand Finale" episode of *Season 6*, a mini history lesson called "Drag Herstory 101".

In Chapter 3, I analyze how racialization and cultural appropriation are used as material in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building endeavor. I analyze some racializing techniques employed in *RPDR,* and the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the show. I then analyze the production of RuPaul's collaborative rap single "Oh No She Better Don't" and the Rap Battle Challenge in the eponymous episode of *RPDR Season 6* from the point of view of racializing stereotypes and cultural appropriation in the legacy of drag that *RuPaul's Drag Race* promotes and casts itself as the keeper of.

In chapter 4, I analyze how different types of family discourse are utilized in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building. Through examples from *RPDR Season 6, Untucked,* and promotional material for *RPDR* related products, I analyze the notion of sisterhood and family discourse that is ever present in *RPDR*, and how its manifestations relate to largely POC house culture (cf. Bailey 2011; Arnold & Bailey 2009) and the notion of chosen family (Hicks 2011). I introduce the concept of imagined family as spectacle, and analyze the importance of this concept to *RPDR*'s legacy building.

In chapter 5, I present my conclusions and suggest further research on *RPDR*.

2. *RuPaul's Drag Race* & the making of "Drag Herstory"

In this chapter, I look at the different aspects of history writing in *RuPaul's Drag Race*: how the show constructs a timeline from the early New York City ballroom culture through to the 2020s, where *RPDR* itself is presented as the pinnacle of drag culture. First I lay out the position of *RPDR* in the historical timeline of drag in the USA. I then move on to charting how the legacy of the 1990 documentary *Paris Is Burning* manifests in *RPDR*. I demonstrate how 'speaking like a queen' (Mann 2011; Simmons 2014) contributes to *RPDR*'s legacy building. Relating to the narrative that *RPDR* is crafting about itself as the keeper and promoter of the history of drag, the next subchapters focus on who is included and excluded in *RPDR*'s legacy of drag and how different styles of drag are featured in *RPDR*'s legacy through the show's cast. In the final subchapter I analyze a video segment from the "Grand Finale" episode of *Season 6*, a one-minute history lesson called "Drag Herstory 101".

2.1 American Drag Story

The success of *RuPaul's Drag Race* is part of a wider phenomenon of making queer culture available for the mainstream as a spectacle (cf. Chauncey 2008). The association of drag with homosexuality projects a sexual undertone to even the tamest of drag presentations. This association makes drag queens "others" in the eyes of the heteronormative mainstream, both dangerous and alluring. This is not a new phenomenon in the USA: the "pansy craze" of the late 1920s and early 1930s saw huge demand for drag performances among the mainstream and the elite. Chauncey quotes Langston Hughes on prominent Harlem drag balls in the 1920s and early 1930s: 'it was fashionable for the intelligentsia and the social leaders of both Harlem and the downtown area to occupy boxes at this ball and look down from above at the queerly assorted throng on the dancing floor' (Hughes 1940, quoted in Chauncey 2008, 310).

Drag balls in Harlem date all the way to the 1860s, but the type of ballroom culture documented in *Paris Is Burning* and referenced in *RuPaul's Drag Race* is a phenomenon that was born in the late 1960s when drag queens of color from Harlem started organizing balls of their own for the Black and Latinx members of the community. The original Harlem drag balls started accepting people of color as contestants in the 1920s, but there they were required to lighten their skin and make their

features appear as white as possible. The new ballroom scene was an anti-racist endeavor born of the frustration with racism in the ballroom culture that the LGBT people of color in New York City had felt for over a hundred years. The house culture that is depicted in *PIB* started in the 1970s when the House of LaBeija, led by its newly appointed Mother, the legendary Crystal LaBeija, started organizing balls as a house. Other houses followed suit. These balls were not centered around drag anymore, but had multiple different categories. (Cunningham 1998)

The new era of ballroom culture moved the focus away from drag queens who 'all wanted to look like Las Vegas showgirls' (Pepper LaBeija, *PIB*) and started featuring dozens of special categories where anyone from the community was welcome to compete. Some of these categories are introduced in *PIB* and copied in *RPDR*, like "executive realness" where the goal is to look the part of a business executive, or "banjee realness" where the most believable impressions of straight "thugs from the hood" get full points from the judges.

Drag pageants evolved in their own direction while the ballroom scene became established in its own world. Both of these traditions continue to flourish in the 2020s. *RPDR*'s concoction of balls and pageants brings these two queer cultures together, at least esthetically. Drag pageants resemble traditional beauty pageants, where the contestants are graded based on their overall presentation (or "beauty"), their walk, outfit and accessories, makeup, hair, and a talent section. Pageant contestants also give speeches that the panel of judges consider in the grading process. All these elements of a pageant are present in *RPDR*: all episodes of the show consist of a challenge (the talent section) and a special-themed runway presentation on the Main Stage in front of the judges' panel (the walk, outfit and accessories, makeup and hair, and beauty section). In the course of a *RPDR* season, the contestants are also asked to speak while standing on the Main Stage with the other contestants after the runway presentation. Usually the contestants are asked to deliver a small speech right before the panel of judges and RuPaul choose the finalists of the season.

Drag is associated with flamboyance, drama, and over-the-topness. The balls and drag pageants require poise, attention to detail, and a serious attitude towards the competition and the category at hand. Yet, as seen in the descriptions of fights on the ballroom floor in *Paris Is Burning* and the ballroom legends' recounting of "wow" moments when outrageous gimmicks resulted in snatching a trophy at a ball (Cunningham 1998), personality and a sense of drama rule the show. This holds true also in *RPDR*, where contestants do not get far with just immaculate makeup skills and wardrobe. The winner of each season has to be a package that embodies *RPDR*'s legacy with their 'Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent', because they represent the franchise in the media and publicity

events and deliver headlining performances and meet-and-greet sessions on tours and at conventions.

Drag as a form of entertainment combines the allure of otherness (cf. hooks 1992) with glamour. Schottmiller points out (2017, 44) that '[h]omosexuals often utilize Camp as an ironic commentary on their Othered positions in society.' The categories of otherness that drag inhabits for the heteronormative white middle-class mainstream are homosexuality and gender diversity, racialization, and class differences. The latter can be seen in the middle-class and upper-class satire and socially upward aspirational fantasies ever present as part of drag performance and the "illusion" that is implied in the ballroom concept of "realness" (cf. Heller 2018).

The success of *Paris Is Burning* brought the ballroom culture behind vogueing into mainstream consciousness. Its audiences also got to see drag as something different than merely humorous "female impersonation" in the style of "pansy shows" of old. I will show in this thesis that the way *RuPaul's Drag Race* leans heavily on the esthetics of *Paris Is Burning* is partly aspiration towards a similar legacy in mainstreaming drag. Edgar writes (2011, 136) that '[t]hrough these references to knowing viewers, RuPaul situates her show in the context of a long and complex queer historical record.' According to my analysis of the historical narrative constructed in *Season 6*, by 2014 *RPDR* had reached a turning point in its popular culture status where this relationship of referencing inside information on queer culture for self-legitimizing purposes goes both ways, and the show gains a more legitimate status not only in the eyes of 'knowing viewers' but also of those who receive their first initiation into these hallmarks of queer culture from *RPDR*.

In 2009, *RPDR* started on the LGBT-specialized lifestyle network Logo TV as a small production that soon garnered a cult following. By *Season 6*, the show's production value had increased significantly as its audience had rapidly expanded. *RPDR* won its first Emmy in 2016 and starting from Season 9 in 2017, moved to a significantly larger network, VH1, which meant a significant increase in production value and audience, and signified *RPDR*'s passage from the margins into the mainstream.

In addition to directly referencing *Paris Is Burning* on many occasions, *RuPaul's Drag Race* has borrowed some of its most popular elements from the ballroom culture through *PIB*: "categories", or themes for the runway sections in each episode; the Reading Challenge, a recurring roast-style segment, which I analyze in subchapter 2.4 below; and much of the witty catchphrases abundant in the show and in frequent use by its fanbase. Next I proceed to introduce some central lexicon in the drag slang used in *RPDR*, much of which can be found in *PIB*.

2.2 'In the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*...'

'Trinity is lip syncing the house down boots. I don't know what that means but she's doing it.'
(Courtney Act, *RPDR* s06e04)

Language use governs the performance of gender, race and any other socially constructed category (cf. Butler 1999). From this perspective, drag queens' use of language has been studied in the setting of *RPDR* (e.g. Edgar 2011; Heller 2018; Moore 2013; Simmons 2014) and in other contexts (e.g. Barrett 1998; Mann 2011). Barrett highlights language use as a vehicle to evoke associations with social categories or groups, and stresses its centrality to drag performance:

> A successful drag performance is dependent on the ability to use language in a way that demonstrates that categories based on gender, ethnicity, class, and sexuality are indeed performances [...] and cannot be taken as obvious or constant reflections of some "authentic" identity.
> (Barrett 1998, 140-141)

A prominent feature of drag queen language use is slang. An important part of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy is its position as the disseminator of slang vocabulary and catchphrases that allow their users to appear "hip". Heller interprets the use of drag slang as 'a coded message about the commercial power of putting one's fabulously queer self to work' (Heller 2018, 135).

Whenever subcultures and countercultures are introduced to the mainstream and attempts to recuperate their esthetics and styles into something marketable proliferate, glossaries appear in lifestyle publications. They promise to unveil the mysteries of one-or-another hidden gem that was hiding under the mainstream's nose all along, behind closed doors in an alleyway just around the corner from the busy commercial district. Examples of this phenomenon are high-profile publications like *Marie Claire* (2015) and Vice Media's *i-D Magazine* (2017) that offer "*RuPaul's Drag Race* dictionaries" that well-to-do suburban white people can use to "spice up" their vocabulary and appear hip (cf. hooks 1992). I provide the following glossary not for the sake of teaching my imagined readers to speak like glittering drag queens or legendary voguers, but in order to both demonstrate the cultural continuum that stretches from the 1980s ballroom culture to the 2020s *RPDR*, and also gain more freedom to make use of these terms in my analysis, having provided an index of words and phrases that mostly appear in both, *Paris Is Burning* and *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

Beat (v. or adj.) e.g. *Beating one's face / mug; That mug is beat!* Refers to applying makeup in a way that produces a very polished result.

'Category is...' (phrase) An announcement of a competition category at a ball. In *RPDR*, the phrase is sometimes used in humorous ways to push a joke further and compare a situation to a ballroom runway competition.

Cheesecake (n.) also **Miss Cheesecake** A 'sexy' person with 'lots of body' (Dorian Corey in *PIB*), that is, a curvy body coupled with mannerisms that present as sexy. This term is borrowed from pin-up esthetics.

Fierce (adj.) Stunning, well-executed, captivating. Can be used of a look, a performance, or a person's way of carrying themself.

Fish (n.) or **fishy (adj.)** A person or performance that presents sexy femininity. This is a pejorative allusion to the vulva. This term does not appear in *PIB*.

House (n.) A unit of chosen family in the ballroom and drag cultures. A house will have a name, a Mother and/or a Father (these are not gender-specific titles). Some houses are more close-knit than others; some will gather mainly for dance practice and balls, while some houses share the same physical living quarters. The concept of *drag mothers* derives from the concept of houses. A drag mother is essentially a drag artist's mentor, but the connection can also be more family-like.

Kiki (n. or v.) Spending relaxing social time with one's peers from the scene.

Legendary (adj. or n.) A *legendary* or a *legendary child* is a person who frequents a certain ball or a larger scene and has gained a reputation by competing on the runway, or sometimes just by being *fierce* even before they have had a chance to *walk*, or compete in a ball. In *RPDR*, *legendary* is mostly used as an adjective, but it carries the same air as the ballroom scene term.

Look (n.) Borrowed from the fashion industry. A *look* can be an outfit-makeup-and-hair ensemble assembled for a specific performance or occasion. It can also mean a reference point to a style of makeup or outfit, as in *going for that authentic RuPaul look with this beat*.

Queen (n.) Outside the ballroom, this term is used to denominate a gay man, but ballroom parlance introduces different shades to this term too. The term **butch queen** exclusively denominates a gay man, but many people whom an outsider would unquestioningly title trans women or transfeminine would title themselves **femme queens**. Both inside and outside the ballroom world, **drag queens** are entertainers who dress up "as women".

Reading (v.) Direct commentary on what one witnesses in their peer. As one sees something that merits a comment, one speaks it out loud, preferably phrasing the message in a witty manner. The product of this act is called a **read (n.)**.

Realness (n.) Defined by Dorian Corey in *PIB* as 'looking like your straight counterpart'. However, the term is used both in the ballroom scene and *RPDR* to describe any example of a well executed concept. Popular concepts in the history of *RPDR* have been *executive realness* (borrowed straight from *PIB*) and *fishy realness* (*PIB* equivalent is *femme realness*; which means "passing as a cis woman"), but in *RPDR*, any unique concept that the contestant can think of may also be dubbed *[something] realness*.

Serving (v.) Exhibiting a concept on the runway. The phrase also implies a successful performance.

Shade (n.) Non-direct commentary. A manner of expressing one's opinion on one's peer indirectly so that they themselves, and others around them, recognize what attribute or aspect of their person, conduct, or looks the commentary is targeted at. This artful act is called **throwing shade (v.)** and a person who does it (either engages in it currently or is known to do it a lot) is **shady (adj.)**.

Sickening (adj.) Astonishingly good. Very close to *fierce* in meaning and use. This term does not appear in *PIB*.

Snatch (v.) e.g. *Snatch trophies* at a competition. Also serves the purpose of a pun, alluding to the colloquial term **snatch (n.)** meaning vulva or vagina.

Turn it out (v.) also **bring it** Indicates an expectation (as an imperative) or a personal intention (as a declaration) to perform according to very high standards.

Vogue (n.) or **voguing (v.)** A dance style that mimics the act of putting on makeup and posing on a catwalk or in a photo shoot. Voguing was brought to mainstream attention by Madonna in 1990, but it originated in the ballroom culture. In *PiB*, Willi Ninja calls vogueing is 'shade in a dance form', so it is a sort of 'visual shade' that the contestants and the houses throw at each other on the runway.

Walk / strut / work the runway (phrase) Directions given by an MC at a ball when contestants are showcasing their skills on the runway and competing in a given category of looks, performances or dance. When repeated multiple times rhythmically, usually on top of background music, the delivery of the phrase also keeps up the atmosphere of the whole ball. These variations of the phrase can be used to encourage the performer to excel at their performance, or as a descriptive imperative or express excitement over the excellence of the performance.

Work (v.) An imperative that incorporates both the applause for the effort that one puts in one's performance, and the work ethic and demand for professionalism in both the ballroom scene and *RPDR*. In *RPDR*, it is sometimes spelled **werk** to mark a specific pronunciation, thereby highlighting the appreciatory properties of the word when used as an exclamation.

RuPaul's Drag Race widely exhibits a humoristic obsession with the vulva and the vagina, and it is alluded to in several popular puns and euphemisms. The use of the term *fish* or *fishy* to refer to "sexy presentation of femininity" is one of the most widespread examples of the casual cissexism in the gay slang tradition that *RPDR* references that both essentializes femininity or womanhood into the vulva or vagina, and portrays femininity or womanhood in a derogatory manner. Also the contestants are judged based on their 'Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent', or, C.U.N.T., which is the legacy they are required to represent.

One noteworthy point about the linguistic legacy that *RPDR* carries into the mainstream is the most widely used slang feature among the contestants, the judges' commentaries and the production's pre-planned puns, the slang-coherent usage of the shock-value items *bitch* and *whore.* Despite the inherent misogyny of these terms, they are not necessarily viewed as insults in North American drag culture (cf. Mann 2011), and in this vein, they have spread far and wide into mainstream language use by "hip" individuals who would not have dreamed of using them in a positive manner in the beginning of the 2010s. Depending on context, they are commonly used as terms of endearment among the community, or enhancers in the vein of expressive *man* or *motherfucker* in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (see Mufwene 1998; Smitherman 2000). I will go into connections between drag slang and AAVE in more detail in chapter 3 below.

2.3 '...The library is open!'

'Shade comes from reading. Reading came first. Reading is the real art form of insult.'
(Dorian Corey, *Paris Is Burning*)

'Reading is essential but shade is indispensable'
(*RPDR* production, written note, *Untucked* s06e06)

RuPaul's Drag Race uses several different means of narrating itself into a canonizer of drag history. One of these narrative vehicles is the recurring Reading Challenge with its roots in the Black and

Latinx ballroom culture. The segment is outspokenly framed as a reference to *Paris Is Burning* with its illustrious definitions and examples of the practice of *reading*. The segment consists of contestants taking turns reading all the other contestants one by one, making witty remarks about characteristics that are supposedly recognized by everyone (including the targets themselves) as something worth commenting on.

The challenge is opened by RuPaul with the line 'In the great tradition of *Paris Is Burning*, the library is about to be opened! Because reading is what?' to which the contestants are supposed to answer, chanting in unison like school children: 'fun-da-men-tal'. The contestants then take turns in the spotlight. During their turn, they wear special "reading glasses" to show that the insults that they are dishing out upon the other contestants during the routine are just a part of the game.

The routine is arranged in the form of a mini lecture in drag culture: the segment opens with an introductory headline referencing first the source of the "reading session" practice (*Paris Is Burning*) and subsequently the importance of this exercise to drag culture (fundamental). The opening ritual is followed by "reading exercises", improvised performances that can also be considered lessons by experts in the field: *RPDR* contestants. The success of these *reads* depends on the sophistication of the delivery; an elegant read includes witty references, rhyming and puns, and clever use of drag lingo. At the end of the routine, the performances are "graded" on the basis of the quality of their form, not their substance. If the jokes make RuPaul and the other contestants laugh, they are winning material, but the delivery is a big part of the effect.

The process of choosing a winner for this mini challenge is one instance where the show's authority on drag culture and history becomes obvious: RuPaul judges whether the puns and references in the reads are both funny and in accordance with the culture that *RPDR* is promoting. Fans of the show learn to distinguish what kind of reads are considered worthy of a win in the show and what elements in a contestant's style of reading might merit the winner's label of 'shady bitch'. Rewarding these elements in the Reading Challenge proves them appropriate, and a legitimate part of drag culture. They are subsequently circulated and copied in live shows, original music and on the internet.

The jokes featured in the *Season 6* Reading Challenge are standard roast material. They revolve around the contestants' age; their size and weight; their perceived impaired intelligence; the condition of their teeth; their nationality, ethnicity or assumed U.S. citizenship status; their makeup skills; the condition and quality of their wardrobe and wigs; their style of drag; and sometimes characteristics of their personalities or mannerisms.

Schottmiller argues (2017, 90) that

> [b]ecause RuPaul situates the practice historically, she informs viewers that the cultural practices they witness on *Drag Race* come specifically from gay and trans people of color. If RuPaul did not cite *Paris Is Burning* during these reading challenges, then uninformed viewers could decontextualize the practices and unintentionally erase the histories of queer black and Latina/o [sic] individuals from whom the culture derives.

I maintain, however, that referencing *PIB* as a cultural product works more towards *RPDR*'s legacy building endeavors than simply as a strategy of representation, as RuPaul arguably has every chance to directly cite Black and Latinx queer history in the show and credit the trans people depicted in *PIB* in his own words and inclusive actions. Next I move on to analyze *RPDR*'s legacy's inclusion and exclusion of people and groups who have shaped the drag culture that the show exhibits and represents.

2.4 'We're all born naked and the rest is drag'

In addition to several mentions of and references to *Paris is Burning* and the New York City ballroom culture throughout *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the show clearly states in the course of *Season 6* that one of its missions is to stay true to its legacy and to educate the public on the history of drag. Yet the version of history *RPDR* is referring to and writing for itself is not by far the whole story of drag in the USA. Even though de Villiers points out (2012, 2) that some of the show's assignments work towards a goal of 'countering gay amnesia and generational isolation in a way congruent with the drag balls themselves', I argue in the vein of hooks' critique (1992, 150-151) of Livingston's outsider perspective in *Paris Is Burning* that the history of drag that *RPDR* presents is a neatly designed package that is just rebellious enough but just normative enough to be marketable also to straight, white, middle-class audiences. In this section, I explore who fits in this version of history and why.

Schottmiller notes (2017, 88) that

> [t]he majority of referenced materials on *RuPaul's Drag Race* come from U.S. popular culture, specifically dominant white and heterosexual pop cultural forms. While *Drag Race* repurposes these forms into a queer context, the show simultaneously confers status onto the dominant culture through the referencing process.

I maintain that this overabundance in mainstream reference works toward shaping *RPDR*'s legacy's mainstreaming aspect. While important figures in LGBT history have lent their influence to the show and references to them are made, they are not often named. This works to strengthen *RPDR*'s own legitimacy and status when the material is not credited to its source (cf. Schottmiller 2017, 112-117).

Crystal LaBeija is undeniably an important figure in drag and ballroom history, and many of her mannerisms and remarks (immortalized in 1968's documentary *The Queen*, which became a classic much like *Paris Is Burning* in the 1990s) are cornerstones of extravagant drag language use. Her speech is referenced in *RPDR*, yet the show does not include her name in its version of the history of drag, or the names of any other legendary House Mothers who shaped the ballroom culture that *RPDR* draws influences from. This fact could be assigned to their positions as Black and Latinx political figures, but perhaps their absence is more due to their more pronounced obscurity in the eyes of the mainstream, whereas the celebrities that *RPDR* references work as an easier entrance into drag history. Nevertheless, in the light of the anti-racist history of the Harlem house balls, the contrast with the silence and light-making (pun intended) that characterizes racism-related issues in *RPDR* becomes pronounced.

RPDR's legacy of 'Charisma, Uniqueness, Nerve, and Talent' does not include an outspoken requirement for "realness", but it is implied throughout *RPDR* and held in high regard in the ballroom culture, according to numerous references in *PIB*. In the context of *RPDR*, "realness" means aspiring toward an ideal of "superstardom", as the title that the winner receives is America's Next Drag Superstar (cf. Heller 2018). The domain of superstars is the white mainstream.

Barrett (1998), hooks (1992) and Mann (2011) all note that white women are a normative reference point of "feminine" style in drag language and expression. Although *RPDR* features several contestants of color in all seasons, and in the course of 12 seasons the show has crowned four Black winners, one Indonesian-American, one Latinx, and one Polynesian-American winner, apart from winners it is the white and white-passing contestants who get most of the fame and the most fans. hooks reflects on race in drag:

> For black males to take appearing in drag seriously, be they gay or straight, is to oppose a heterosexist representation of black manhood. [...] Yet the subversive power of those images is radically altered when informed by a racialized fictional construction of the "feminine" that suddenly makes the representation of whiteness as crucial to the experience of female impersonation as gender
> (hooks 1992, 147)

Barrett maintains (1998, 140-141) that creating associations with different social groups through linguistic performance is one of the epitomes of drag. This notion reflects also on the fantasy lived on the ballroom floor and carried on in the adaptation by *RPDR*. This is contrasted by hooks' analysis of how *Paris Is Burning* sidesteps the lived realities of the racialized minorities it depicts:

> Ironically, the very "fantasies" evoked emerge from the colonizing context, and while marginalized people often appropriate and subvert aspects of the dominating culture, *Paris is Burning* does not forcefully suggest that such a process is taking place.
> (hooks 1992, 150)

I argue that for all its representation and candid outness, *RPDR*'s mainstreaming project also takes the show's legacy further away from its subversive potential and towards packaging queer culture as a neat package where the audience knows "who is what" and can spot straight aspirations instead of witnessing a queer revolution in mockery of mainstream values.

In Barrett's definition (1998, 140), as in the general understanding of drag, "drag queens" are always 'openly (and proudly) gay' men as opposed to "female impersonators" of old who might 'claim to be heterosexual'. This definition is a common misconception, as throughout the history of drag there have been transfeminine drag queens, as well as non-binary and cis women drag queens. Homonormativity is highly visible in *RPDR*. The show features jokes referring to the cruising application Grindr, which in 2014 was specifically used by gay men, so these jokes are deliberately targeting gay men in the audience. The assistant team called the Pit Crew consists of hyper-masculine men wearing nothing but thongs or tight boxer shorts, reminiscent of go-go boys in gay clubs. They are meant to be eye candy for the contestants and audience alike, representing a traditional type of object of desire for gay men, but also for straight cis women in the wider audience segment that the show wishes to attract. The contestants are addressed as "bottoms" and "sissies", and there is a strong assumption that everyone present is a gay man.

One of the show's catchphrases, 'We're all born naked and the rest is drag', is frequently repeated in the course of the show. Nevertheless, trans exclusion is pervasive in *RPDR*. In every episode, RuPaul delivers his famous drag-racing-themed line that illustrates how the show defines its cast: 'Gentlemen, start your engines, and may the best woman win!' Most trans contestants are forced to assume the role of a gay man that is appointed to them, because they mostly stay closeted in order to be able to compete in the show. The remainder of this subchapter handles transphobic policies and content in *RPDR*.

RuPaul has repeatedly voiced his view in interviews by popular media that drag and trans issues do not mix. This is also evident in the way *RPDR*'s legacy excludes trans people. In *RPDR Season 5*, Monica Beverly Hillz was the first contestant to come out as trans while she was competing in the show (*RPDR* s05e02). When she was eliminated from the show one episode after coming out, RuPaul's parting words to Monica after the Lip Sync For Her Life were: 'Monica, you came here with a secret. And the secret is, you are fierce and talented. Go share *that* with the world' (*RPDR* s05e03). I interpret this precedent as a guideline in *RPDR*: trans visibility is not what this show is about. The contestants are expected to bring to the show their 'talent' and 'fierceness', not their identity.

When 2017's *RPDR Season 9* featured the show's first out trans woman contestant, Peppermint, the production wanted to include in the show a scene where Peppermint "comes out" to her fellow contestants. Peppermint has been out as a trans woman since 2012 and the "coming-out announcement" she made in the backstage lounge during the show was to inform those of her fellow contestants who did not already know she is trans. The production, and RuPaul himself, knew at the time of casting that Peppermint is an out trans woman. Yet, throughout *Season 9*, RuPaul's classic lines that refer to the contestants as 'gentlemen' continue in the same form as previous seasons, and the point that they had a woman in the competition was not discussed or taken into account in language use. This amounts to erasing Peppermint's transness during *Season 9* for the production's part, which is in line with the tendency for trans exclusion in *RPDR*'s legacy.

RuPaul has stated in an interview with *The Guardian* (2018) that he only acknowledges trans women who haven't had top surgery to be part of the drag he considers valid. *Season 6* contestant Gia Gunn, who was not out as trans while competing in *Season 6*, was cast in *All Stars Season 4* in 2018. At the time of her appearance on *All Stars*, she did not have breast implants, neither did Peppermint while competing in *Season 9*. The interview with *The Guardian* suggests this is a prerequisite for RuPaul's acceptance. This obsession with trans bodies feels especially backwards considering the slogan 'We're all born naked and the rest is drag' that implies that gender is performative and constructed (Butler 1999). Also the fact that several contestants (and judges) have had considerable amounts of cosmetic surgery done on different parts of their bodies without it bothering anyone in the production shows that *RPDR* employs specific policies concerning trans people.

After *Season 6* aired, transphobic language use in *RPDR* was publicly widely criticized. Subsequently some changes were made by the show's production, removing from the show some transphobic slurs that I list in this paragraph. The most notable change was replacing one of the show's catchphrases "You got she-mail" from *Season 7* onward. The catchphrase is a pun that combines "email" with a highly offensive transphobic slur "she-male" that refers to transfeminine people

mostly in the field of sex work. One segment in *Season 6 Episode 4* that was strongly criticized as harmful was also cut out from subsequent versions after the episode first aired. This was a "mini challenge" named "Female or She-male?" where the contestants were supposed to guess whether an extreme close-up picture was cropped from a picture of 'a biological woman or a psychological woman' as RuPaul put it (*RPDR* s06e04). This "mini challenge" illustrates *RPDR*'s legacy of cisgender stereotyping.

Season 6 is a rare production of *RPDR* in that it features two out trans celebrity guests: Our Lady J (*RPDR* s06e04) and Chaz Bono (*RPDR* s06e09). Our Lady J does not get any lines, she is just there to play the piano in group choreography rehearsals. Chaz Bono is interviewed about his relationship with his family, most notably his mother, the gay icon Cher. I interpret this inclusion as tokenist and not representative of actual trans inclusion in the show. Gia Gunn's parting words to the other contestants when she is eliminated from *Season 6*, 'you guys are all still dudes' (*RPDR* s06e05), speak volumes on this.

In an interview (*The Guardian* 2018a), RuPaul declares that 'drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture'. Nevertheless, my analysis of *RPDR*'s legacy shows that women are largely excluded from this legacy, but for the purposes of reference. Trans people are assumed absent, and when only men are addressed in the show, no room is given to the possibility that all the men might not be cis. In the vein of hooks (1992, 150), I argue that for all the show's subversive potential, *RPDR* in the end works within this 'colonizing context' in upholding the idealized trope of the white woman as the epitome of "realness".

I now move on to analyzing what kind of drag fits in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy.

2.5 Category is: *Drag Race* Realness

Different categories of drag that *RuPaul's Drag Race* has established over the course of its runtime play an essential part in the show's legacy building. Understanding these categories, how they relate to each other, and on what basis contestants are cast in the show provides a more detailed picture of who and what fits in *RPDR*'s legacy.

RPDR Season 6's Musical Theater Challenge "Shade: The Rusical" (*RPDR* s06e04) has the contestants choose the characters they play in the segment, according to different drag styles that the characters

represent. This mini musical acts as a crash course to the types of drag seen in *RPDR*. Every style is appointed with corresponding choreography and lyrics. The "pageant queens" offer advice to the newcomer; the "comedy queens" make fart jokes; the "showgirls" quarrel amongst each other about who is the star of the show. One of the "showgirls" is wearing extra padding to signify that she is playing the role of a "big girl". In addition, one character is a dreaded "shady queen" who steers the newcomer away from the traditional queens and helps her become a successful "fishy queen".

The different styles of drag that "Shade: The Rusical" references are present in *RPDR Season 6* in a pronounced manner. I argue that the contestants are cast in the show not only as individual artists, but also to represent different legacies. These differences are kept in the forefront throughout the season. They are discussed in the Work Room, in the judges' critiques and in behind-the-scenes dialogue in *Untucked*. Most of the contestants are largely portrayed through the lens of these categories. In this section, I analyze how these different drag legacies that form the drag universe according to *RPDR* have been put to work as building blocks for the show's own legacy.

Based on my analysis of *RPDR Season 6*, I have identified six partly overlapping categories that the contestants represent: *Pageant Queens*, *Comedy Queens*, *Big Girls*, *Seasoned Queens*, *The New Generation*, and *Outsiders*. These categories are one point of view for observing the basis on which the cast of a *RPDR* season is formed and along what lines the production builds desired characters out of the contestants by editing into the show different things from each contestant's dialogue and conduct. The categories provide background for questions that *RPDR Season 6* promises to answer: "what kind of drag is *real* drag?" and "what makes a *real* drag queen?".

Pageant Queens are high-glamour performers who have made a big part of their career competing in drag pageants. *Comedy queens* are those contestants whose style of drag fits the classic genre of slapstick or stand-up comedy entertainers. These two categories are most familiar to the mainstream audiences who have little or no previous knowledge about drag. *Big Girls* is a performer category, not a style category. There are discussions in the *RPDR* fandom, and in the show itself, concerning the success, career opportunities, and representation of Big Girls. Big Girls are large, usually fat performers who often have difficulty getting cast into any other genre than comedy, because of the pervasive fatphobia in show business that does not take fat artists seriously. The category *Seasoned Queens* includes contestants from all kinds of drag legacies who have worked in the industry for a long time and made a name for themselves. The contestants in the category *New Generation* are relatively new to drag, but also represent a style of drag that differs from the "classic" styles. The last category I decided to name less glamorously *Outsiders*. It includes those contestants who are cast to represent a drag culture outside of the U.S. mainstream drag.

Pageant Queens

Pageant drag reproduces ultra-feminine looks with hip padding and prosthetic breasts, impressively sculpted wigs and headpieces, high-glamour ensembles with huge jewelry and ball gowns glittering from head to toe with rhinestones, sequins, or elaborate beading. The gowns, headgear, and accessories are supposed to be, or at least look, expensive. Pageant drag makeup most often goes for supermodel style femininity with immaculately blended contouring, popping highlighter, and luscious eyes, lashes and lips. Some Black Pageant Queens, like *Season 6*'s Trinity K. Bonet (22), sport makeup with highlighter so light that the effect on their faces is reminiscent of the skin lightening requirement of the balls of old. Colorism is alive and well in show business and the beauty industry, where light means beautiful. I shall go deeper into the subject of racialization in *RPDR* in chapter 3 of this thesis.

Comedy Queens

Comedy in *RPDR* is a blend of slapstick, stand-up comedy and the "pansy shows" of the 1930s (see Chauncey 2008, 314-318), witty banter rife with homosexual innuendo and sex-themed puns. Also slang is used abundantly in the show's comedy, and slang-related puns are common. Besides drag-specific humor, the subjects of comedy in *RPDR* include body size, gendered bodily or facial features, alcoholism or other addictions, sexual promiscuity, sex work, sexually transmitted infections, accents or lacking proficiency in English, class-related aspects like poverty or the condition of teeth, and perceived impaired intelligence.

In *RPDR*, the Comedy Queens who dare to make the most painful jokes, often playing with stereotypes, can expect to thrive. Darienne Lake (41) references her big size in her comedy. She incorporates eating snacks in her performance on the impersonation challenge "Snatch Game" (RPDR s06e05). *Season 6*'s winner, professional insult comedian Bianca Del Rio (37), who is of Cuban and Honduran descent, also includes Latinx stereotyping in her stand-up routines (*RPDR* s06e08). I will go more into racializing aspects of humor in *RPDR* in chapter 3 below.

Big Girls

Every season of *RPDR* so far features one or two Big Girls, or fat contestants. In the course of twelve regular seasons and four All Stars seasons, not one Big Girl has won. The Big Girl role in "Shade: The Rusical" was played by a thin contestant, April Carrion, who wore extra padding for the role and tried performing fatness by making comical facial expressions. Judge Michelle Visage comments on April's performance saying 'being the big girl, it's not just about the size, it's an attitude.' There are several assumptions in the U.S. mainstream drag culture concerning the kind of drag a large and heavy artist can or can't do. The only Big Girl contestant in *Season 6*, Darienne Lake, comments on these prejudices in the course of *Season 6*. She says that she wants to show the world that a Big Girl can also be sexy, and not just funny. Mostly *RPDR* offers the same opportunities to fat artists as mainstream showbusiness: funny, sad or evil characters.

Seasoned Queens

All seasons of *RPDR* until 2020 have included a number of mature professional drag queens as contestants. Their overall manner is that of hardened drag veterans, whose inclusion in the cast elevates *RPDR*'s status. At the very least their experience in the field has made them self-sufficient, at best insightful, resourceful, and agile in different situations and fast-paced changes in their working environment. Casting these contestants gives the show legitimacy both in the eyes of the fans who know these performers and their work, and in the eyes of uninitiated viewers who will get a glimpse into how seasoned professionals work. Bringing them together with each other and the younger contestants offers the audience both education, interpersonal drama, and family-like bonding between the more and less experienced contestants. I shall go more into the family discourse employed in *RPDR* in chapter 4 below.

The New Generation

The New Generation includes drag artists that started doing drag after having watched *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The contestants in this category already hold *RPDR* as one, if usually not the only, reference point for their art. These contestants have nevertheless already been performing for some years before getting cast, because a level of professionalism is required for the competition.

One aspect of the New Generation is straying from the classic styles of makeup and padding. Their looks frequently include more graphic-style makeup and outrageous wardrobe, and less striving for "natural" or "realistic" feminine looks. Their padding of breasts or hips can be nonexistent. One example is Milk (25), who is portrayed in the show as a weird queer performance artist whose drag does not fit the gender binary. This is a breath of fresh air among all the traditional femininity and body essentialism usually seen in the show.

The New Generation also includes a visual and couture-oriented side reminiscent of the fashion aspect of ballroom culture. Many famous young drag artists are at the edge of haute couture. Some of them are or aspire to be fashion models, in or out of drag. Milk, who has done a lot of modeling out of drag, represents a new era of fashion-oriented club kids among the New Generation of drag.

Outsiders

Competitions are always more interesting with a few dark horses–or 'black horses', as Joslyn Fox has the expression (*RPDR* s06e02). In some cases, the Outsiders can snatch the crown like *Season 4*'s winner, the Pittsburgh drag monster Sharon Needles, or rise to runners-up like *Season 6*'s Courtney Act (31), who is known for competing in drag in Australian Idol in 2003. Categories like this are useful for building tensions among the contestants and marketing the individual contestants as characters that the audience can get to know easier than actual holistic human beings. However, Outsiders also bring in new audiences from their own existing fanbase, along with viewers who would not be interested in the similar-looking "regular" categories of drag that most of the cast of any *RPDR* season represents.

Mostly the unexpected castings are just token "weirdos" who are brought in for "flavor" and do not have a realistic chance to win the competition. As opposed to Pageant Queens or traditional Comedy Queens, those who do not fit neatly in a major category of drag are expected to deliver greater variety: contestants who show up in long sequined dresses week after week do not get scolded, but in *Season 6*, when vaudeville-inspired BenDeLaCreme does two different old lady impersonations, judge Michelle Visage devalues her second performance on the basis of 'I feel like we've seen it already' (*RPDR* s06e05).

Most seasons of *RPDR* have featured one or two contestants who have a connection to Puerto Rico, even if they were not living there at the time of appearing on the show. Puerto Rico has a rich drag culture of its own, with established traditions that sometimes clash with the reality tv setting and

U.S. drag culture. Puerto Rican performers who appear on *RPDR* usually have their own makeup and hair artists at home, which sometimes reflects on their ability to thrive in the Work Room environment and with the necessity to do everything themselves. The only Puerto Rican contestant in *Season 6*, April Carrión (24), does not have this particular problem, as she is a skilled makeup artist. Nevertheless, the different tradition and different cultural take on drag does not work to her advantage when the judges evaluate the contestants for "personality". There is something lost in translation in this setting where the Puerto Rican contestants are cast as a cute and mostly harmless novelty. The fact that English is usually not these contestants' first language further enhances that setting.

Last but not least there are regional specialties whose inclusion lends the show more authenticity in drag enthusiasts' eyes. Even though they might not look too different to the mainstream eye, the fans will know. Casting regional favorites, or lately increasingly Instagram favorites, is one way the show is catering specifically to the local U.S. LGBT audience.

To wrap up, these rough categories provide a backdrop for charting the drag universe according to *RuPaul's Drag Race*. The audience comes to recognize the different styles featured in RPDR and starts using the categorization the show has offered to them as a tool for understanding drag. As new performers who have started their career in drag informed by the show are cast season by season, the categorization perpetuates itself, propelled on by *RPDR*. This consistency by category does not represent the objective reality of U.S. drag, but it does give an inkling as to what kind of representation is offered in the pinnacle of mainstreaming of drag. Local drag scenes, ones with local performers and local audiences, usually allow more diversity in artistic expression than the representation in the arena that *RPDR* provides. As Michael Shetina points out with regard to the division of the drag queens studied by Esther Newton in the 1970s to largely POC 'street queens' and largely white 'stage queens' (Newton 1979, 7–15, quoted in Shetina 2018, 147), there was a 'division of knowledge' between those groups (Newton 1979, 97, quoted in Shetina 2018, 147).

> Thus, one's citation of gay archives performs positions related to gender, class, race, ability, age and other categories that point to affinities inside and outside LGBTQ communities. Even within drag communities, these citations do not produce a democratic archive but rather a hierarchical archival terrain that elevates certain forms of knowledge while excluding others. (Shetina 2018, 147)

I now move on to analyzing the hierarchical archival terrain of the show's legacy through an analysis of a mini lecture on the history of drag according to *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

2.6 “Drag Herstory 101”

"Take the world by storm, educate the masses. Get it, rearrange it, internalize it. Turn it."
(Vivacious’s farewell note, *RPDR* s06e03)

The *Season 6* “Grand Finale” episode, edited from footage of a gala event with a live audience, features a video segment titled “Drag Herstory 101”. The segment is introduced by RuPaul with a scripted hosting monologue:

> From bearded ladies to mermaids, from club kids to pageant queens, this season the different styles of drag raised a lot of questions. So we put together a little herstory lesson. Learn it, and learn it well.
> (RuPaul, *RPDR* s06e14)

The one-minute-long video segment is a montage of still photos with descriptive titles and a continuous voice over in RuPaul’s voice, paired with nostalgia-inducing instrumental pop music, a remix of a RuPaul original song. The photos include a selection of singers, models, actors, stage or movie characters, comedians and other performing artists. The odd ones out are activist Marsha P. Johnson and ‘Warhol Superstar’ Holly Woodlawn. They are the only ones mentioned by name in the ‘herstory lesson’ who are not cis men. Most photos get a reaction from the theater audience, although those portraying the most widely recognized icons receive a roaring applause. During the photo montage, the voiceover provides a list of what ‘drag is’, fitting each photo with a point:

> What is drag? Drag is underground, and over the top. Drag is political, and politically incorrect. Drag is camp, and couture. Drag is punk, and mainstream. Drag is a laugh riot, and it can start a revolution. Drag is never having to say you’re sorry, because drag is all about being whoever the hell you wanna be.
> (RuPaul, *RPDR* s06e14)

Finally, right after voiceover RuPaul in the video clip has had her say, simply ‘Paris Is Burning’ pops on the screen: a group photo featuring some of the 1980s New York City ballroom scene legendaries who appeared in the documentary *Paris Is Burning*. Their names are not included in the ‘herstory lesson’ like in the other photos, but fans will recognize at least Angie Xtravaganza, Octavia Saint Laurent, Dorian Corey, Pepper LaBeija, Freddie Pendavis and Willi Ninja.

Paris Is Burning promotional photo © Academy Entertainment 1990

As the phrase 'Paris is Burning' melts into the applause of the live audience in the fancy theater in downtown LA, live RuPaul adds a final comment to the 'herstory lesson': 'And drag brings people together'. At the end of the segment, a karaoke moment unites the whole audience, the contestants, and the backup dancers on stage. The live audience in the "Grand Finale" recording stands up in the theater and joins hands. Lyrics from "Shade: The Rusical" (*RPDR* s06e04) run at the bottom of the screen so the tv audience at home sees the lyrics and can sing along, and take part in this moment where 'drag brings people together'.

Shetina notes that *RPDR* "forges kinship through shared knowledge and queer citation and has the potential to inculcate its viewers with queer modes of feeling about its archival objects" (2018, 144). The crossfade of the 'herstory lesson' clip with the footage of the *Season 6* "Grand Finale" gives the impression that the present *Drag Race* related moment is the climax of drag history so far. The karaoke segment follows the same kind of logic: the song is from an episode of *Season 6,* and the audience is supposed to recognize it, and they're supposed to assign to it a status as an important part of drag history. One that they can all participate in.

The closing comment of the "Drag Herstory 101" clip comes from live RuPaul, 'And most important of all, drag never, ever takes itself too seriously!' I interpret this as a disclaimer that refers to his view

that drag is supposed to be humoristic and free of identity politics, in response to the criticism that the show has received concerning its transphobic language use and policies discussed above.

"Drag Herstory 101" made the audience think that they got an answer to a question they had been asking *RPDR* all along. In remarking that 'different styles of drag raised a lot of questions', the introduction speech appoints the initiative to the audience. *RPDR* is then awarded the honor to answer this question. The audience is reminded that this information is valuable, and although *RPDR* is happy to oblige, the audience should keep its end of the deal and 'learn it well'. This tone labels the show a public educator, a messenger of drag from the depths of the underground history to the mainstream of today.

2.7 Conclusions

In this chapter I have shown that *RuPaul's Drag Race* takes on a role of educating its audience on the history of drag in the USA, and that this role is an essential part of its legacy building. I have shown that even though *RPDR* references trans-centered *Paris Is Burning* extensively, the history of drag according to *RPDR* largely brushes over trans women and instead focuses on gay men and the culture of balls and pageants, nightclubs, musical theater, and comedy. I have also demonstrated that part of the show's legacy building is framing the present and the future of drag by casting contestants from selected traditions of drag that the show introduces on its own terms, and presenting them as representatives of U.S. drag. Schottmiller suggests (2017, 82) that '*Drag Race* episodes crystallize a RuPaul-centric drag history. As future generations screen these archived episodes, they remember U.S. drag in the early 21st century through RuPaul and her legacy.' As seen in my analysis of the cast of *Season 6*, this has already started taking place in the 2010s with the New Generation of U.S. drag informed by *RPDR*.

In my analysis of *Season 6,* I have shown that *RPDR* engages in a process of mainstreaming drag, and positions itself as the ambassador of drag for the mainstream. As Schottmiller notes (2017, 78), '*Drag Race* disseminates Camp to both queer and heterosexual audiences. These diverse audiences often consume queer culture and Camp through Drag Race as cultural outsiders watching a queer reality television show.' Chauncey writes (2008, 319) of one 1930s Times Square elite clubs' drag show that by staging a "pansy show" inspired by a famous Harlem drag ball, it 'promised to offer its patrons a safely contained, but still titillating, version of the subcultural practices of a marginalized group'. I

argue that *RuPaul's Drag Race* is building its legacy in the same vein: the content is authentic but heavily curated to attract a mainstream audience who wants to peek into the exciting queer world of drag–from the safety and privacy of their own homes.

I now move on to analyze racializing language use and stereotyping in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building in chapter 3.

3. Dragging Up Race

In this chapter I am looking at how racialization and cultural appropriation are used as material in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building endeavor. Strings and Bui write (2014, 823) that *RPDR Season 3* started the routine of fashioning the contestants' performances into 'racialized caricatures that helped expand its brand recognition'. Mainstream media representation and inclusion of people and bodies that are racialized as other than white is still an ongoing struggle in the 2020s. While the success of a reality tv show co-created and headed by a celebrated Black drag queen like RuPaul and featuring several Black and other POC contestants is great representation, *RPDR* contains a degree of stereotyping that reveals the marketing of racialized tropes to white audiences. In her 1992 essay "Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance", bell hooks crystallizes this phenomenon:

> The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture.
> (hooks 1992, 21)

In the first subchapter in this section I analyze some racializing techniques employed in *RPDR*. The next subchapter focuses on the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the show. I analyze examples of frequently appearing AAVE elements in *RPDR*, including the nonsensical catchphrase 'She done already done had herses'. The final subchapter in this section focuses on the racialized aspects of the production of RuPaul's collaborative rap single "Oh No She Better Don't", featuring the contestants of *Season 6*, who recorded vocals for the song and performed on a music video as part of the contest. I analyze the rap single and the Rap Battle Challenge in the eponymous episode of *RPDR Season 6*. I argue that the examples in this chapter work towards fusing racializing stereotypes and cultural appropriation into the legacy of drag that *RuPaul's Drag Race* promotes and casts itself as the keeper of.

3.1 Race to the Crown

Strings and Bui's 2014 study on the appearance of racializing stereotypes in *RPDR Season 3* demonstrates the success of racially 'risqué' humor and impersonation in RPDR. In my analysis of *Season 6*, I also found racially informed humor abundant. In the episode "Drag Queens of Comedy" (*RPDR* s06e08), the contestants had to prepare and perform a stand-up routine in front of a live audience on the Main Stage. Bianca Del Rio, who was ultimately crowned the winner of Season 6, focused her jokes on her own Latinx background, cracking stereotypical jokes about poverty, stealing, and 'housekeeping' Trinity K. Bonet (22), the only Black contestant, also makes a joke about stereotypes of Black people: 'as you have noticed, I am Black, but you don't have to worry about your purses or your wallets cos I already got 'em'. She also jokes about growing up poor, and her cheap grandmother. These stereotypes are welcomed from minority representatives themselves, and the judges and audience laugh at the jokes without restraint.

When referring to or speaking with Latinx contestants, RuPaul frequently references telenovela esthetics with an exclamation 'Escandalo!' This is an act of enforcing yet another racializing stereotype: Latinx contestants are expected to portray drama and sentimentality akin to telenovelas.

Other contestants frequently target Latinx contestants with jokes on immigration, and humor based on questioning their legal citizenship status. Also proficiency in English often surfaces as a theme in *RPDR*, especially with Puerto Rican contestants. Their accent and frequent struggles with vocabulary are often made fun of, and even commented on in a negative manner, as seen in critiques received by April Carrión, the only Puerto Rican contestant in *Season 6*. She was told that her style of reciting her lines in the acting challenges did not 'work' (*RPDR* s06e03, *RPDR* s06e04), which implies that a character is required to possess certain cultural capital, and an ability to produce a certain normative type of expression, in order to 'work' in *RPDR*.

I argue that all these vehicles of racializing Latinx contestants in the show work to build *RPDR*'s homonationalist legacy. Puar describes homonationalism (2013, 336) as 'the celebration of the queer liberal subject as bearer of privacy rights and economic freedom [that] sanctions a regime of racialized surveillance, detention, and deportation.' I argue that the show's production approves of immigration-themed racist jokes because they posit "patriotic" gay Americans–in *RPDR*'s context, that means U.S. citizens–as the norm in *RPDR*'s legacy.

Next, I move on to analyzing the use of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) in the show's legacy building.

3.2 You Can't Spell *RuPaul's Drag Race* Without Race

'Why it gotta be black?'
(RuPaul)

Barrett points out that '[w]hen discussing choices of linguistic style [...] it is important to remember that speakers often base their linguistic behavior on stereotypes.' Barrett's study of African American drag queens' speech identifies an 'AAVE style, a gay male style, and a style based on stereotypes of white women's speech.' Barrett notes that 'each of these styles indexes a social group,' meaning that they are references to, even imitations of, that group. (Barrett 1998, 145)

Drag slang appeals to mainstream audiences because of the association to the subculture that it represents (cf. Rodriquez 2006). That naturally includes U.S. drag culture, but also the underlying cultures that the expressions allude to, which in *RPDR*'s case is the mainly Black and Latinx New York City ballroom culture. The drag slang used in *RPDR* originated in the Harlem balls, so it is "underclass" and largely of African American and Nyorican origin. This means that the slang carries an element of racialization. Because of the stereotypical perception of Black and Latinx people as over-the-top or dramatic (cf. Jackson 2017), the use of this slang hereby accentuates the extravagance of drag queens who speak it. This aspiration towards racializing esthetics is clearly seen in the current trend of using images or GIFs of Black people in witty reactions and excessive displays of emotion in digital communication. Jackson (2017) calls this 'digital blackface'.

Some of *RPDR*'s most memorable catchphrases are distinctly "ghettoed" in the direction of AAVE by using features like multiple negation and AAVE specific verb tense and aspect (see Adjaye and Andrews 1997; Mufwene 1998). Often "drag spelling" also mimics AAVE pronunciation, as in the case of *werk* and the catchphrase 'Oh no she betta don't'.

One example of AAVE style found in the drag slang used in *RPDR* is the satirical use of hypercorrection, like in *hunty*. Hypercorrection is defined as 'an incorrect analogy with a form in a prestige dialect which the speaker has imperfectly mastered' (Decamp 1972, 87). This is not a feature specific to AAVE, but instead evokes the vernacular position from which the speaker takes jabs at a

higher-class way of speaking. The emphasizer *hunty* is a ballroom staple expression that sports a satirical hypercorrected form of the word *honey* for the benefit of slang usage. In the case of *hunty*, the 't' is added after a syllable ending with 'n', in order to mimic Standard American pronunciation that does not drop t's after n's. An example of vernacular dropping of 't' is *going to* –> *gonna*. The same satirical hypercorrection apparatus is used in *RPDR* with other words that have a similar morphology as *honey*, like *morning*, resulting in wishing a *good mornting*.

The near-dadaistic multi-purpose expression 'She done already done had herses' appears over the course of several *RPDR* seasons in seemingly random situations. After *Season 6*, the phrase solidified its position in the *RPDR* universe as it became the show's video message announcement jingle. *RPDR*'s adaptation of reality tv hit *America's Next Top Model*'s "Tyra Mail", a message for the contestants, appears during the first minutes of every episode of *RPDR*. As part of the introduction of the episode, the contestants gather before a big television screen in the Work Room to watch a teaser-style video of RuPaul delivering a cryptic message consisting of word play and pop culture references related to the theme of the episode. After a 2014 controversy over transphobic language use by the show's production, 'She done already done had herses' replaced the previous jingle, a transphobic pun 'You got she-mail', in the video message.

Over several seasons of *RPDR*, 'She done already done had herses' has assumed a number of different communicative roles in any scene, none of which are dependent on the meaning of the phrase itself in any way. This hilarious absurdity in the usage of the catchphrase is one feature that makes it perfect marketing material, as it acts as an inside joke that makes the audience curious. Schottmiller writes (2017, 112) of cultural 'forgetting' of sources that the audience is not able to decode from a cultural reference that 'With *RuPaul's Drag Race*, the reality show itself is the dominant text, and the referenced source materials represent the subordinate texts subsumed within *Drag Race* and hailed through Camp.' When the catchphrase is circulated, it carries a reference to *RPDR*. This reference in turn signifies 'queer cultural capital' (ibid., 81-86) to those who are familiar with the show.

Another property that turns the phrase into a moneymaker is the form itself, which represents exoticized "ghetto" parlance that carries an air of "authenticity" in pop culture (cf. Rodriquez 2006). One of the crucial markers is the AAVE-specific use of verb tense and aspect *done had* (see Mufwene 1998). In Standard American English, the phrase would read 'She has already gotten hers'. This form might work if the origin of the phrase were widely known, in other words, if it were a direct reference to some content with prominence of its own. A pop culture example of a successful simple, standard-form, context-based catchphrase like this is 'I don't know her', a direct reference to Mariah

Carey throwing shade on Jennifer Lopez by claiming that she has never heard of her (*The Guardian* 2018b).

In order to make a catchphrase viral with no context whatsoever, its form must be somehow noteworthy. Schottmiller notes (2017, 81) on decoding cultural capital and assigning it to references that when 'referenced through Camp, the source material gains status as something worthy of remembrance.' With 'She done already done had herses', vernacular syntax and non-standard wording make it memorable, recognizable, and interesting to the audience. I argue that in this case, the desired effect is not achieved through camp, but instead through "ghetto" esthetics represented by AAVE, which signifies exoticized Black culture that the audience recognizes as a consumable product through its widespread use as such in popular culture (cf. hooks 1992; Jackson 2017).

In the next subchapter I analyze a straightforward appropriation of Black street culture esthetics in *RPDR*: a rap single and accompanying music video featuring the mainly-white cast of *RPDR Season 6*.

3.3 'Oh No She Better Don't'

The contestants of *RPDR Season 6* participate in a "Rap Battle Challenge" that includes recording vocals to a rap song and shooting a music video, performing as two rival groups named The Ru-Tang Clan and The Panty Ho's. The audience is reminded several times during the episode that the single called "Oh no she better don't" is available for purchase on iTunes (*RPDR* s06e06).

The catchphrase 'Oh no she better don't' is used directly to sell the language and the associations to Black street culture that come with it. The fact that it is a rap song is not irrelevant in this regard. Tying the esthetics neatly to the street culture roots of rap, RuPaul announces a plan to donate part of the revenue from the single's iTunes sales to charity to the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center's Homeless Youth Services. No mention of these donations can be found anywhere online, but the pledge is stated in the *Season 6* episode "Oh no she betta don't" (*RPDR* s06e06). Rap as a genre is in itself a direct reference to Black street culture. Even though the charity pledge that RuPaul announces in the episode grants the product further context, those members of the audience who do not know about the pledge are able to pick up the cultural reference and enjoy the "flavor" it brings to the product (cf. hooks 1992; Rodriquez 2006).

bell hooks summarizes that 'white cultural imperialism [...] allows white audiences to applaud representations of black culture, if they are satisfied with the images and habits of [sic] being represented' (hooks 1992, 154). Strings and Bui note (2014, 824) that in *RPDR Season 3*, 'black and brown cast members were more often required to perform stereotypical racial identities. RuPaul would refer to such performances as giving "personality"'.

In *Season 6*, the same phenomenon emerges during the "Oh no she better don't" rap challenge when the white judge Santino Rice comments that Trinity K. Bonet 'should have her ghetto pass revoked' for not being on beat (*RPDR* s06e06). Here, the show gave Trinity a racist telling-off for not performing blackness in a way that fits the bill. Trinity represents 'ghetto' for the production and the audience because she is Black. Everyone in the cast is aware that Trinity's fortés are high glamour pageant styles and Beyoncé impersonations, not rapping. Nevertheless, Trinity gets scolded especially for not excelling in the rap challenge because her presence as a Black contestant in the show is reduced by the production to representing stereotypes of Blackness. This narrow space given a Black contestant caters to a white audience, because if Trinity were given screen time as a complex character despite her Blackness, it would eat away on the pleasure derived from a recognizable, containable otherness (cf. hooks 1992).

Many of the contestants who are featured in "Oh no she better don't" either are white or pass as white. This fact gives a significantly wider audience a permission to enjoy this product, when race is made a less visible element in it. I argue that this rap song is not targeted at Black audiences to signify shared cultural knowledge, or intended as representation of Blackness in the show, but that instead its connotations of "authenticity" and "spice" is intended to offer a white audience the pleasure of engaging with otherness (cf. hooks 1992). It is noteworthy that the only Black contestant participating in the challenge, Trinity K. Bonet, gets the harshest critique from the judges. The episode also shows Trinity's teammate BenDeLaCreme (31), the white theater geek from Seattle, giving Trinity advice with enunciation during rehearsal (*RPDR* s06e06). Meanwhile the non-Black contestants who participated in the rap challenge are given the opportunity to venture into traditionally Black cultural territory and cherry-pick from it the elements that best support their characters.

RPDR's concoction of drag and rap clearly tickles the audience in the right place: in October 2020, the single had been played on Spotify 1,659,308 times, and the official music video viewed on YouTube 1,863,379 times. The product contains the satisfaction of picking up inside references that drag culture is heavily laden with (cf. Shetina 2018) and rap suits this splendidly, as it is an

intertextuality-heavy format. The format also carries the thrill of Black street esthetics. Rodriquez writes on white consumers' relation to hip hop that

> members of the scene position themselves as "cool" or hip by its association with African Americans, presenting themselves as confident, progressive whites smoothly moving through a cultural milieu of blackness. Yet their adherence to colorblind ideology leads them down the curious path of consuming hip-hop precisely to indicate the irrelevance of race in their own lives.
> (Rodriquez 2006, 646)

Rodriquez's notion of 'colorblind ideology' as a component in cultural appropriation is not only present in hip-hop related challenges, but throughout *RPDR*'s legacy, where the white heteronormative mainstream's racial, sexual and gender privileges are blurred in favor of RuPaul's slogan 'Everybody say love!'. POC minorities' subcultures are merged with *RPDR*'s representation of LGBT culture as accessible for the mainstream to consume in the vein of colorblindness.

3.4 Conclusions

In this chapter, I have shown how *RuPaul's Drag Race* utilizes in its legacy building racializing stereotypes and appropriation of racialized minorities' slang and culture, and contrasting racialized Others with the show's homonationalist legacy. Through *RPDR*'s encouragement of stereotypical racializing performances, the show benefits from the "spice" that their otherness offers, as it references minority subcultures in ways that mainstream white audiences know how to interpret. My analysis of the use of African American Vernacular English in the show's catchphrases demonstrates that *RPDR*'s legacy of "authenticity" is built with the aid of the "ghetto" esthetics carried by AAVE.

As I have shown in this chapter, stereotypes also inform what kind of race-related performance is considered "proper drag" for whom in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy. My findings on *RPDR Season 6* are consistent with Strings and Bui's (2014) findings on *RPDR Season 3* in that contestants of color have less space for stylistic variety in race-related performance than contestants racialized as white. Any race-related esthetics employed by contestants of color are scrutinized severely, but white or white-passing contestants also get praise for their appropriative performances. I argue that this

reinforces the validity of white drag queens over drag queens of color in *RPDR*'s legacy, and works to presume the show's target audience as white.

In the next chapter, I move on to analyze the different family discourses employed in *RuPaul's Drag Race*.

4. Family Discourse and *RuPaul's Drag Race's* Legacy

In this chapter I am looking at how different types of family discourse are utilized in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building. Frequent talk of family in the show ostensibly creates family-like bonds within the larger drag community, but I argue that the way *RuPaul's Drag Race* includes the audience in the equation makes this "drag family" itself a product for the mainstream to consume. As I show in this chapter, *RPDR* builds its legacy through the creation of a "drag family" that encompasses both drag artists and the audience. One vehicle in this endeavor is initiating the audience to the proper 'codes of conduct', requirements for drag queens in the name of 'sisterhood' (Simmons 2014). I proceed to show that the audience members who consume the products affiliated with *RPDR* get a feeling of belonging in that extended "drag family". With that acquired family status comes a feeling of entitlement to those aspects of different subcultures that *RPDR* frames as "drag herstory".

In the first subchapter I present examples from *RPDR Season 6, Untucked,* and *RPDR* related products. Through these examples I analyze the notion of sisterhood and family discourse that is ever present in *RPDR*, and how its manifestations relate to largely POC house culture (cf. Bailey 2011; Arnold & Bailey 2009) and the notion of chosen family (Hicks 2011). In the final subchapter I discuss the mainstream marketing aspects of the family discourse related elements in the show and in promotional material for the show's byproducts like tours and fan conventions. I begin this chapter by charting the definitions of family, sisterhood, and houses relevant to this study.

A family is defined by Hicks (2011) as an intimate emotional unit, usually composed of two or three generations. Sisterhood is a concept that is widely used in LGBT discourse, Black culture and activism, and some traditions of feminism. In these contexts, as well as the context of *RPDR*, in addition to inclusion and support, it implies similar backgrounds, and thereby also assumes shared struggles. A house in ballroom culture refers to first and foremost an economic unit involving shelter and mutual support, where intimate relations most likely will form but is not a prerequisite (Arnold & Bailey 2009).

A useful concept in analyzing these types of discourse concerning family-like structures is kinship. Kinship as an anthropological concept charts social relations with varying degrees of intimacy and practical mechanisms (Freeman 2007, 295).

> Defined more loosely as the set of possibilities for social relations in any given culture whether they are addressed by state policy or not, kinship has also mattered to people of all

> sexual orientations whose emotional, financial, domestic, and other ties do not follow the lines of dyadic sexual union and genealogical descent.
> (Freeman 2007, 295)

Hicks (2011, 27) elaborates the concept of kinship as 'a system that organizes and approves particular forms of human relationships.' Hicks makes use of di Leonardo's concept of kin work and writes on kin work and relationship hierarchies that 'kinship is not a descriptive system but is, rather, a socially achieved *and enacted* one' (ibid., 28, italics in original). Hicks describes the formation of a queer type of chosen family (ibid., 36): 'lesbians' and gay men's friends may perform roles usually associated with kin – emotional and practical support, social activities – and those people are redefined as significant, and even as family.'

Chosen families are not always a substitute for a birth family. They can be an extension of it, or exist simultaneously in different spheres. It is significant that chosen families arise out of circumstance, not exclusively choice, and are characterized by requirements for similar kin work as in the birth family (Hicks 2011, 36). Hicks reminds (ibid., 37) of the cruciality of the fact that queer forms of kinship are discovered and enacted 'within a context of heteronormativity' where 'it is not that friends as family are freely chosen but, rather, act as an intervention by lesbians and gay men into a kinship field that tries to discount their forms of relating.'

The need for a chosen family instead of or in addition to birth family varies with each individual person's history and situation. Individual LGBTQ+ people's relationships with their birth families are very different, as are the reasons behind close, distant, or even hostile family relationships. Cultural differences play a part in these relationships too. It is common to see among the contestants in *RPDR* some who share that their Christian or otherwise conservative families have grown distant, or severed ties with them altogether, when (or if) they came out as gay, or as drag queens. Some have reported that upon coming out when they were young, their families kicked them out of the house. LGBTQ+ youth are overrepresented in homeless youth, making up an estimated 20–40 % of homeless youth in the USA and being from 2 to 13 times more likely to experience homelessness than straight and cis youth (Homelessness Policy Research Center 2019).

My analysis of the family related details and discourses employed in *RPDR* focuses on what the production has chosen to include in the show and in the promotional material. This material is selected from what was recorded on set, and then rearranged during editing. There is no manageable or credible way to determine the relation or relevance of the contestants' stories or discussions to the reality outside the show, nor is it necessary for the purposes of this study. I am

only analyzing what viewers see when they watch the show and the promotional material. The discourse I am concerned with is the one that the production has chosen to construct for viewers.

4.1 Family, Sisterhood, Houses and Mothers in *Drag Race* Discourse

RuPaul's Drag Race serves its audience an overabundance of camp and drama, and family is often at the heart of it: sisterly squabbles and fairytale-like envy of the pretty stepsister who gets to be the star of the ball, but also nurturing, self-sacrifice, and promises of sisters always sticking together. Hicks references Nardi, writing that 'the gay men in his study used familial terms – 'brother', 'sister', 'family', 'mother', 'auntie' – to describe their gay friends' (Nardi 1999, 52–3, cited in Hicks 2011, 36) and goes on to note that '[t]hese linguistic devices create family-like bonds, even if frequently suffused with irony or camp' (Hicks 2011, 36). There is irony in supermodel RuPaul reciting scripted monologues of family values and playing Mother to the yearly growing motley litter of drag queens, but the subject of family is at the heart of the show. In this subchapter, I analyze the applications of the notions of family, sisterhood and house in *RPDR*'s legacy building.

4.1.1 Family

There is a lot of talk of family in *RPDR*. The contestants talk about their family relations, parents or other significant family members they have lost or become estranged with, along with the ones who they get support and love from. One of RuPaul's frequent catchphrases in the show is '*RuPaul's Drag Race*–Bringing families together'. On one hand, the phrase is delivered in an ironic way, referring to the fact that the content of the show is not exactly "family friendly" with all its sexual innuendo, raunchy jokes, and sometimes heavy subject matter – along with the inherent homophobia in mainstream media, which widely considers homosexuality and transness in and of themselves "inappropriate themes" for children. On the other hand, the phrase implies that the show's contestants actually find a connection with their family when they take part in the show. Many seasons of *RPDR* feature a scene with a contestant reconnecting with estranged members of their birth family whom the show's production has contacted with news about the contestant's success with drag.

The subject of family is kept in the forefront in the behind-the-scenes material shown in *Untucked*. In almost every episode of *Untucked*, the contestants all gather in front of a television screen to watch a video message that the production has requested from an actual family member of one of the contestants. For some contestants, this close person to send a message is their mother (or in many cases, a "mother figure" who raised them, like a grandmother or an aunt), in other cases it is their boyfriend or spouse, or on rare occasions, a close friend. Some contestants are shocked to receive a supportive message from a family member they have become estranged with (either due to being gay or because of choosing to do drag), but many who receive these messages have a good relationship with that family member. After the video message has been played back, the contestant whose family member was seen on the screen is encouraged to share a story about their relationship. These situations get very emotional and the contestants are in a lot more vulnerable position than in regular conversations where they have more choices concerning when or whether to engage in conversations about highly personal subjects.

Even though the contestants' birth families are a constant feature, the most prominent family theme in the show is the "*Drag Race* family" of *RPDR* that they become a part of by participating in the contest. Mentions of "sisterhood" (cf. Simmons 2014), "Mothers" referring to drag mothers, and reassurances that "we are family" are abundant in the show. I interpret these elements as part of the show's narrative of 'bringing families together', where everyone involved will find their rightful place in the "*Drag Race* family".

RuPaul likes to deliver a speech on chosen family in most of the seasons of *RPDR* and in media interviews. RuPaul phrases it as follows: 'We as gay people get to choose our own family'. This statement includes two implied, colliding assumptions. First, it posits all drag queens as gay, and in the light of the show's policy concerning the type of accepted contestants (see chapter 2.5 above and *The Guardian* 2018a), specifically gay men. Second, it once again includes the viewers in the circle when RuPaul addresses the contestants, and at the same time everyone within hearing range, concluding that 'we are your family'. Hereby the audience is assigned a place in the "chosen family" of the drag queens, who are assumed to be gay men and positioned as "choosing" to accept the audience as part of their family. I argue that regardless of who is actually watching, the assumed audience is not specifically gay men. As a result of this framing of the audience as outsiders who are granted access into a subculture, I argue that joining the "*Drag Race* family" promises to award them with "gay sisters" and the thrill of association with otherness (cf. hooks 1992) and a status as a progressive liberal (cf. Rodriquez 2006).

In reality, the audience cannot be a part of the kind of chosen family that is a core concept in LGBTQIA+ culture, because as total strangers they do not engage in kin work to form meaningful relationships with the contestants. Based on this observation, I have termed the "*Drag Race* family" that includes the audience an *imagined family as spectacle*, as opposed to a chosen family of the type that drag families in real life can represent. This is not to say that *RPDR* fans cannot form meaningful relationships amongst each other on fan platforms (cf. Phillips 2011), but that the act of watching a reality tv show, adopting its esthetics and the information it offers on its cast, and engaging with these aspects in social media does not count as kin work. I shall now demonstrate through an example of audience participation how *RPDR* builds this imagined family as spectacle.

A karaoke segment that closes "Drag Herstory 101" in the *Season 6* "Grand Finale" episode (*RPDR* s06e14) features a song excerpt from the mini musical "Shade: The Rusical" (*RPDR* s06e04) that describes the drag community as a family. This constitutes a "family moment" in the show's narrative of 'bringing families together'. In the karaoke segment, the audience sings along to a song that they have seen the contestants perform earlier in the season and therefore can feel a connection to. The verse goes like this:

> Time to take a stand and come together
> 'Cause we are each other's family
> All two million six hundred three thousand forty sisters
> This is our land
> And we are the Queens

The verse contains several elements that characterize the image of LGBT "rainbow culture": 1. taking a stand, 2. direct mention of family, 3. a specific number to refer to concrete human individuals, 4. 'our land', and 5. queens. I now proceed to analyze this verse from the point of view of family discourse.

In the context of the song, taking a stand can be directly associated with straight allyship in support of "the LGBT community" and the political struggles of LGBT people. This is followed by the argument that also allies are part of the "family".

The number 2,603,040 is ostensibly a reference to the '525,600 minutes' in the lyrics of the song "Seasons of Love" from the hit musical *Rent*, but since it is an arbitrary number and not all viewers are familiar with the reference, it can also be interpreted freely. It could even be imagined to represent the estimated number of viewers of the show, the "*Drag Race* family" that is ultimately the main focus of the karaoke moment.

The ‘land’ in this verse can be interpreted in two ways. The strong homonationalist (cf. Puar 2013) dimension in the show lends credibility to the interpretation that it refers to the USA. The other interpretation is more interesting to the argument about the “*RuPaul’s Drag Race* family” and the show’s contribution to the mainstream image of homogenous LGBT culture: the ‘land’ can refer to the cultural niche that the show projects to inhabit in this moment. Musicals, divas, all things camp; gay in a safe way. This family moment has no room for kinky puns or references to anal sex or cruising, just glitter and feather boas and approachable glamour that the mainstream straight audience recognize, admire, and would be glad to be associated with.

Also the mention of “queens” carries three meanings that are all equally plausible. The first, most exclusive one of them is “queen” as the slang word for a gay man. The second, most obvious possible meaning would be a reference to the contestants, meaning drag queens. The third, most inclusive interpretation is in line with the imagined family as spectacle. It encompasses everyone who participates in the moment, letting the audience believe themselves the stars of the show, the “queens” of their own lives in the context of these glittering festivities, hand in hand with their professional “sisters”.

4.1.2 Sisterhood

Sisterhood in *RuPaul’s Drag Race* is an identity category that proposedly encompasses all drag queens and the fans. Simmons remarks (2014, 631) that ‘[m]arginalized groups such as drag queens have unique ways of using language to create a shared reality.’ In *RPDR*, a version of this reality is carefully communicated to the audience, who are invited to join the family through learning the ‘drag queen code of sisterhood’ observed in Simmons’ 2014 study on *RPDR Season 4*. In order to illustrate how promoting this ‘code of sisterhood’ can be recognized as an essential factor in *RPDR*’s legacy building, I now proceed to analyze how elements of ‘proper conduct’ (ibid., 646) outlined in the code can be found in *Season 6*’s collaboratory rap single “Oh no she better don’t” (*RPDR* s06e06; WOWPresents 2014).

The title and lyrics of “Oh no she better don’t” are a good example of voicing the “proper” drag attitude towards looks, conduct and self-promotion. According to Simmons’ findings, in order to adhere to the code of sisterhood, one must follow these guidelines and assist one’s “sisters” in following them: ‘look like a ‘‘fish,’’ don’t be ‘‘hungry,’’ be humble, resist negativity, don’t complain, and exude professionalism’ and ‘speaking appropriately, particularly within conflict settings’ (2014,

645-646). These precepts are all applied in “Oh no she better don’t”, starting with the title of the song.

‘Oh no she better don’t’ is an exclamation referring to someone’s apparent intention to do something outrageous or cause a scene. Rap battle is a fitting format for boasting about one’s own excellence and reading others while still keeping inside the safety of the code of sisterhood, where ‘coming for someone’s look or attitude is proper mode of conflict engagement’ (Simmons 2014, 644).

Simmons’s definition of ‘looking like a “fish”’ or being “fishy” referring to sexy femininity is the most prominent of the guidelines to be addressed in “Oh no she better don’t”. Many of the contestants reference beauty, body, and femininity in their boasts. Joslyn Fox (27) even coins the pun ‘mother-fishing drag queen’ in her lyrics for the song.

Exuding professionalism is the other prominent theme in the song. ‘Always keep my nose clean’, Joslyn Fox declares in her rap segment. Trinity K. Bonet delivers a mini lecture on pageant drag in her segment: ‘Just take a second to see how this goes / Rhinestones, big hair, gown to the floor’. Darienne Lake’s whole segment is dedicated to chiding shoddy drag queens for not exuding professionalism: ‘Keep your shoes on honey / Till you make that money / 'Cause your toenail draggin’ / And that sure ain't funny’.

The precepts of humility, resisting negativity and refraining from complaining are referenced in “Oh no she better don’t” in less straightforward ways. The format of a rap battle itself is a special kind of setting that highlights the deviation from ‘proper conduct’ (Simmons 2014, 646) in normal situations and intrapersonal communication within the community. The rap battle likens itself to a “reading session” (see chapter 2.4 above) and lets participants perform reads of themselves in this context. Lines like ‘Laganja's on the track and y'all can't handle me / I'm bustin' through that door and smokin' on that tree’ in LaGanja Estranja’s rap segment, and Bianca Del Rio’s declaration ‘All them bitches can't handle my sassy-ass mouth’ in the course of the song are examples of this kind of “self reading” that deals with breaches in the code of proper sisterly conduct. The lines boast about abandoning the precepts of professionalism and humility, or focusing on negative things, in a jubilant way. To turn the situation around, Bianca’s segment ends with a disclaimer: ‘I'm-a call your ass chimney cos you look like a brick’. This line provides a legitimate cause for the insult, as it is meant to comment on a “sister’s” shoddily padded hips or buttocks that look lumpy and square, instead of smooth and round as they ideally should. No matter how mean the output, it nevertheless contributes to the precept of aiding one’s “sisters” to exude professionalism.

Simmons found that part of adhering to the code of sisterhood is the expectation that through following the code, a drag queen will 'uphold drag family values' (2014, 645). This aspect is also seen in the "gang boasts" characteristic of rap battles that can be found in the lyrics of "Oh no she better don't". BenDeLaCreme's section in the song features a line that pays respect to her team The Ru-Tang Clan: 'I back four fly ladies who'll be comin' your way'. Also Milk delivers a nod to her team in her closing line 'Milk is in the house and them other bitches, whoo'. The other team, The Panty Hos, gets a shoutout from team member LaGanja Estranja in a line that goes 'Panty Hos and Control Top D giving you body'. These are all examples of acknowledging one's affiliation with one's "family", which translates in the context of rap into rival troupes or gangs.

The street gang association that comes with the rap battle format of "Oh no she better don't" reflects the idea of the "drag family" as similar to a gang. Here we can again see a reference to *Paris is Burning* and houses in ballroom culture. Street gangs and houses both usually consist of mainly Black and Latinx members. In *PIB*, Dorian Corey calls houses the equivalent of street gangs: 'Houses are gay street gangs. Now, where street gangs get their rewards from street fights, a gay house street-fights at a ball. And you street-fight at a ball by walking in the categories.'

4.1.3 Houses and Mothers

The family-like structure of houses in ballroom culture is utilized in the concept of "drag family" that *RPDR* promotes. In addition to houses as family-like groups with communal living arrangements, a different definition of a house is a tightly-knit group that competes against others at balls, with the tightest connection between them formed by style and skills (Cunningham 2018). Many *RPDR* contestants report in the show that they are members of houses. All of those houses are not active in the ballroom scene but may be completely focused on drag. These houses tend to be more of the style-based persuasion than the communal living type, but they may nevertheless involve a good amount of caregiving. Moreover, even those contestants who are not part of houses usually have reported to have had "drag mothers" as mentors in early stages of their career. RuPaul is frequently called Mama Ru by the contestants, the judges, the fans, and even by the mainstream press (e.g. *Marie Claire* 2015; *People Magazine* 2016).

As de Villiers notes (2012, 2), '[i]n many ways RuPaul's Drag Race contains the kind of intergenerational tutoring, communication, competition, and transformation of drag occurring between "mothers" and "children" in the drag world depicted within *Paris Is Burning*.' The esthetics and familial nomenclature of house culture are present in *RPDR* and in the discussion surrounding

the show, but the practice in the show differs a great deal from the house culture it likes to compare itself to. Arnold and Bailey note in their study of house culture's family-like structures (2009, 179 - 183) that nurturing, caregiving and home-like functions like eating, shelter and taking care of the "children's" health are responsibilities taken on by house mothers. When RuPaul appears as Mama Ru in *Season 6*, she is less like a caregiver and more like a cold capitalist mentor in the dog-eat-dog world of show business. When she talks about food, she promotes not eating. When she talks about survival, instead of giving concrete advice she promotes a work ethic that supposedly helped her get to where she is now. I see this discontinuity between words and actions as a neoliberal capitalist appropriation of family discourse. There is much talk of family but a lack of caregiving beyond the surface.

Arnold and Bailey note (2009, 182) that in the houses they observed in their study, 'Mothers provided safer sex advice based on life experience, their involvement in professional HIV-prevention work, and also (in some cases) sex work.' Sex work is frequently referred to in *RPDR* as the butt of a joke or in a casual pun, but never as a serious or normal discussion topic that is relevant in people's lives. Safer sex is discussed in the course of the seasons in passing if at all, and sexually transmitted infections are also mainly brought up in jokes. During *Season 6*, contestant Trinity K. Bonet came out as living with HIV, but this confession did not induce an on-camera surge of support from Mama Ru. Neither was a wider discussion on sexual health edited into the show as a result of Trinity's disclosure.

In her 1992 essay "Is Paris Burning?", bell hooks summarizes the consequences of the outsider perspective:

> Those of us who have grown up in a segregated black setting where we participated in diverse pageants and rituals know that those elements of the given ritual that are empowering or subversive may not be readily visible to an outsider looking in. Hence it is easy for white observers to depict black rituals as spectacle.
> (hooks 1992, 150)

I argue that this can be directly applied to straight mainstream demands of inclusion in minority subcultural spaces and LGBTQ familial structures, as in the imagined family as spectacle that is part of *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy.

4.2. The Value of Family Values

Framing the audience of a reality tv show as a family while portraying actual family-like bonding among the cast works to commodify the notion of chosen family. Hicks reminds that queer chosen families are formed out of shared experiences of exclusion, and recognition of similar needs:

> just as heteronormative kinship practices exclude lesbians and gay men, whether that be denial of the value of those relations or literal exclusion from 'the family' when someone comes out, so gay men and lesbians, too, construct their difference from heterosexuals through new kinship forms such as the idea of families of choice.
> (Hicks 2011, 37)

The life stories that the contestants share on *RPDR* become consumable products for the audience who have been invited to be part of the "family". Interviews and makeup tutorials on the network's official YouTube channel, RuPaul's DragCon (WOWPresents 2019), and worldwide tours in huge arenas with artist Meet & Greets seven days a week (e.g. Werq the World tours) all cast the contestants as the audience's "sisters" who owe it to their "family" to spend time with them, help them out by sharing makeup or wardrobe tips, open up their lives for them, and also get up on stage to deliver a fierce show. This part of the "family" demands access to the artists' personal space (for free via Instagram and Twitter and by paying for Meet & Greet tickets at shows and conventions), while they at the same time expect a professional performance, complete with a transporting experience that gives the audience the possibility to forget about their own problems and be entertained.

The promotional video for the 2019 *RPDR* fan convention DragCon (WOWPresents 2019) advertises the event as a 'world of community' where 'we are all family'. The event is referred to as a 'family reunion' several times by the fans and stars of the show alike. The fans are shown meeting the contestants of previous *RPDR* seasons, taking pictures together and laughing with them, and hugging them. In an interview excerpt, a fabulously dressed-up fan says that 'the fans of DragCon are different. They want to experience more of each girl'. What is sold here is personal attendance and even intimacy with the contestants. The show has made them stars, but they are portrayed as approachable and available for the fans. Due to the reality tv format of the show, the fans feel they know the stars intimately, and that the stars in turn are emotionally responsible for them. The fan in the interview continues that the event is not only about spending time 'in the world of the queen, but also the person who's visiting can share a little bit of their world [...] they get to share their

personal stories'. This reveals the emotional work that is expected from the stars. The audience pays to personally meet them and physically touch them, but also to get close to them in a more personal way, like an actual family member. They are invited to think that by attending the event and purchasing Meet & Greet tickets, they will claim their place in the "family".

In an interview excerpt (WOWPresents 2019), a fan says that 'you see regular people, you see kids with their parents'. The advertisement also shows footage of children dancing at DragCon, all dressed up. It is clearly said in network approved video material that promotes DragCon (WOWPresents 2019; ET Live 2019) that this is an event that welcomes families with children to have fun – and make purchases. The videos showcase makeup products from the show's sponsors, glittering accessories and clothing, and fan merchandise, all for sale at the event. The small children shown in the promotional material are all ostensibly white. This could be a realistic depiction of the audience demographic, but I am inclined to think that the lack of children of color in the advertising is most probably deliberate editing to cater to the network's middle-class white audience. Spaces inhabited by white people look safer to white audience members and also communicate exclusivity. This both attracts a more affluent crowd and justifies higher prices.

The imagined family as spectacle constructed by the *RPDR* franchise is a rhizome-like network that interlinks many commercial and consumption aspects of show business. The personal and interpersonal social media content that the contestants themselves create, the "family drama" that is reported on the network's channels when dramatic things happen between the contestants in real life, and the plethora of internet series that spring out of the tangles of inside jokes and feuds in the drag corner of show business all produce revenue to the network and the larger mainstream entertainment establishment. Money from advertisement flows based on clicks and views. Exclusively priced tickets to events are sold out in minutes when the cast is widely recognized, either due to their achievements in the show or their prominence in different media after their appearance in the show.

All this being said, it is worth noting that many performers do the customer service work of mingling with fans and share their lives on social media because they get something out of it for themselves too. Many of the contestants have become social media stars that get the equivalent of living wages out of sponsorships and bookings, and revenue from the ads in their content.

4.3 Conclusions

I have shown in this chapter that the discourses of family and sisterhood play such a big part in *RuPaul's Drag Race*'s legacy building that the show and its fanbase have declared themselves one big family. I have demonstrated how *RPDR* utilizes the narrative of 'bringing families together' to invite its audience to join the "chosen family" of those whose birth families are not available to them. According to *RPDR*'s message, joining this family is simple: all the audience needs to do is watch the show, participate in the discussion on social media, share the show's promotional content, attend live tours and conventions, and buy merchandise. This definition of membership in a chosen family, however, is in direct conflict with the notion of kin work that is required of family-like relations, and works towards offering the contestants' intimate relationships as a spectacle and a consumable product. I have termed this iteration of the "*Drag Race* family" *imagined family as spectacle*.

I have demonstrated how family discourse is also present in the content of the show: the contestants talk about their relationship with their birth families, and their chosen families. The way houses and drag mothers are discussed in the show keeps the show's references to ballroom culture in the forefront and strengthens the link between *RPDR*'s legacy and ballroom culture.

5. Conclusions

In this study I have shown that *RuPaul's Drag Race* builds its legacy by engaging in history writing, perpetuating racializing stereotypes and appropriating minority subcultures, employing family discourse, and exhibiting representations of queer kinship. I have also shown that these aspects of queer culture are recuperated into consumable form in *RPDR*'s legacy building endeavor when the show assumes the role of ambassador of drag for the mainstream. All these aspects are present in *RPDR Season 6*, which I analyzed for this study.

I demonstrated in my analysis of *Season 6* how, through indirect and direct references to other cultural products like *Paris Is Burning*, *RPDR* is writing a version of the history of drag in the USA and appearing as both, a keeper of the drag legacy it deems essential, and an educator of the audience on the history of drag. One direct example of this educational aspect is the "Drag Herstory 101" video that captures RPDR's version of the essence of drag with its cavalcade of pop culture figures and a voiceover flurry of sassy definitions of what all drag can be. Another example is the Reading Challenge with its references to the library and reading exercises.

As I have shown in my analysis, *RPDR*'s legacy includes cis gay men and largely excludes women, cis and trans. The show's homonormative rhetoric also excludes other trans people, even though definite policies of the show have only surfaced concerning women. I have demonstrated how the different traditions of drag that fit in *RPDR*'s legacy are portrayed in the show through categorizations that exhibit the diversity and historical continuum of drag styles in a way that accommodates an outsider perspective that is assigned to the audience.

In my analysis of *RPDR Season 6* I found that *RPDR* promotes racializing stereotypes which denote the kind of race-related presentation that is preferable for a contestant of color. These findings are consistent with Strings and Bui's 2014 findings from *RPDR Season 3*. Hereby the show also outlines how "real drag queens" perform race. I have demonstrated that in limiting the expression of Black and Brown contestants to racializing tropes that are understandable from an outsider perspective, the show also presumes its audience as predominantly white.

The dramatic language that is such a big part of *RPDR*'s legacy building is largely the slang of Black and Latinx ballroom culture. Many of the show's catchphrases are AAVE style, which is one of the ways the show appropriates Black subcultures. I have shown how Black street esthetics are used in the show for "authenticity" and "spice", and how these subcultures are embedded into *RPDR*'s

legacy by applauding non-Black contestants for their ventures into this territory. This encourages the audience to adopt an attitude towards these subcultures that assumes them as part of "drag culture" that they have access to through *RPDR*, resulting in 'forgetting' the appropriated source (cf. Schottmiller 2017). According to my analysis, also in this respect the audience is projected as predominantly white, and providing white middle-class audiences with fresh material from marginalized cultures becomes part of the show's legacy.

RPDR's legacy includes family values in both, the prevalence of the subject matter of family, and encompassing the audience and the cast of the show in an apparatus of an imagined family as spectacle. This legacy is fortified by promoting the 'code of sisterhood,' identified by Simmons (2014), that delineates proper conduct for 'upholding drag family values'. As seen in the promotion of *RPDR* related products, the *RPDR* franchise utilizes these family values in a way that commodifies queer kinship.

RPDR's mainstreaming mission has two sides. Firstly, the franchise brings drag as an art form new attention and grants drag artists new audiences, which has been beneficial to artists and productions who have struggled with credibility or suffered from the obscurity of their art form. Secondly, the mainstreaming process also includes appropriation of the different drag subcultures that the contestants represent and other minority subcultures that *RPDR* bases its legacy on. I have shown in this study that esthetics and elements form these subcultures are sold to the audience as spectacle and spice. While these esthetics allow mainstream audience members to feel "hip" by association to minoritized subcultures, in the everyday life of drag artists and the minorities whose subcultures are appropriated, these elements contribute in labeling them as Others.

This study has not touched nearly everything that could be said about the mainstreaming of LGBTQ and POC cultures and opening these communities' rituals and spaces to white, straight mainstream audiences. I hope to conduct and read multiple studies on this subject in the future, and to see versatile representation of drag reach platforms that allow appreciation and compensation to flow to all those hard-working artists and communities who deserve it.

Bibliography

Adjaye, Joseph K. and Adrianne R. Andrews. *Language, Rhythm & Sound : Black Popular Cultures into the Twenty-First Century*. Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

Arnold, Emily A., and Marlon M. Bailey. "Constructing Home and Family: How the Ballroom Community Supports African American GLBTQ Youth in the Face of HIV/AIDS." *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services* 21.2-3 (2009): 171-88.

Bailey, Marlon M. "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing the Gender System in Ballroom Culture." *Feminist Studies* 37.2 (2011): 365-86.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the subversion of identity.* New York: Routledge, 1999.

Carpentier, Nico, et al. *Audience Transformations : Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*. 1 Vol. New York: Routledge, 2014. Routledge Studies in European Communication Research and Education.

Chatters, Linda M., Robert Joseph Taylor, and Rukmalie Jayakody. "Fictive Kinship Relations in Black Extended Families." *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25.3 (1994): 297-312. *JSTOR*.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York. Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.

Childs, Becky, and Gerard Van Herk. "Work that -s!: Drag Queens, Gender, Identity, and Traditional Newfoundland English." *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 18.5 (2014): 634-57.

Decamp, David. "Hypercorrection and Rule Generalization." *Language in Society* 1.1 (1972): 87-90. *JSTOR*.

Edgar, Eir-Anne. ""Xtravaganza!": Drag Representation and Articulation in "RuPaul's Drag Race"." *Studies in Popular Culture* 34.1 (2011): 133-46. *JSTOR*.

Farrier, Stephen. "International Influences and Drag: Just a Case of Tucking Or Binding?" *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training* 8.2 (2017): 171-87.

Freeman, Elizabeth. "Queer belongings: Kinship theory and queer theory." *A companion to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer studies* (2007): 293-314.

Goldmark, Matthew. "National Drag." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian & Gay Studies* 21.4 (2015): 501-20.

González, Jorge C., and Kameron C. Cavazos. "Serving Fishy Realness: Representations of Gender Equity on RuPaul's Drag Race." *Continuum* 30.6 (2016): 659-69.

Gudelunas, David. "Culture Jamming (and Tucking): RuPaul's Drag Race and Unconventional Reality." *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 1.2 (2016): 231-49.

Haggerty, George E. *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*., 2008.

Hamera, Judith, and D. S. Madison. *The SAGE Handbook of Performance Studies*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2006.

Heller, Meredith. "RuPaul Realness: The Neoliberal Resignification of Ballroom Discourse." *Social Semiotics* (2018): 1-15.

Hicks, Stephen. *Lesbian, Gay and Queer Parenting : Families, Intimacies, Genealogies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

hooks, bell.

– *Black Looks: Race and representation.* Boston, Mass.: South End Press, 1992.

– *We real cool: BlackMen and Masculinity.* London: Routledge, 2004.

– *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies*. Routledge, 2009.

Horn, Mirjam. *Postmodern Plagiarisms : Cultural Agenda and Aesthetic Strategies of Appropriation in US-American Literature (1970–2010)*. 49 Vol. Berlin ;Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 2015. Buchreihe Der Anglia / Anglia Book Series.

Jackson, Lauren Michele. "We Need to Talk about Digital Blackface in Reaction GIFs." *Teen Vogue* 2 (2017).

Lindner, Oliver, and Pascal Nicklas. *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation : Literature, Film, and the Arts*. 27 Vol. Berlin ; Boston: De Gruyter, 2012. Spectrum Literaturwissenschaft.

Lingel, Jessa, and Adam Golub. "In Face on Facebook: Brooklyn's Drag Community and Sociotechnical Practices of Online Communication." *Journal of Computer- Mediated Communication* 20.5 (2015): 536-53.

MacAulay, Maggie, and Marcos Daniel Moldes. "Queen Don't Compute: Reading and Casting Shade on Facebook's Real Names Policy." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33.1 (2016): 6-22.

Mann, Stephen L. "Drag Queens' use of Language and the Performance of Blurred Gendered and Racial Identities." *Journal of homosexuality* 58.6 (2011): 793-811.

Moore, Ramey. "Everything Else is Drag: Linguistic Drag and Gender Parody on Rupaul's Drag Race." *Journal of Research in Gender Studies* 3.2 (2013): 15.

Mufwene, Salikoko S. *African-American English : Structure, History, and use*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Muñoz, José Esteban. *Cruising Utopia : The then and there of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

Myers-Scotton, Carol. *Codes and Consequences : Choosing Linguistic Varieties*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Nordeen, Bradford. "Private Dancers: Social Media Platforms and Contemporary New York Drag Performance." *Afterimage* 41.4 (2014): 12-5.

Patterson, Eleanor. "The Golden Girls Live: Residual Television Texts, Participatory Culture, and Queering TV Heritage through Drag." *Feminist Media Studies* 16.5 (2016): 838-51.

Phillips, Tom. "When film fans become fan family: Kevin Smith fandom and communal experience." *Participations* 8.2 (2011): 478-496.

Puar, Jasbir. "Rethinking Homonationalism." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45.2 (2013): 336-9.

Rodriquez, Jason. "Color-Blind Ideology and the Cultural Appropriation of Hip-Hop." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35.6 (2006): 645-68.

Schottmiller, C. “Reading RuPaul's Drag Race: Queer Memory, Camp Capitalism, and RuPaul's Drag Empire.” *UCLA*. (2017). ProQuest ID: Schottmiller_ucla_0031D_16244. Merritt ID: ark:/13030/m58m25wj. Retrieved from https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0245q9h9

Seidman, Steven. *Beyond the Closet : The Transformation of Gay and Lesbian Life*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

Shetina, Michael. "Snatching an Archive: Gay Citation, Queer Belonging and the Production of Pleasure in RuPaul’s Drag Race." *Queer Studies in Media & Popular Culture* 3.2 (2018): 143-58.

Simmons, Nathaniel. "Speaking Like a Queen in RuPaul's Drag Race: Towards a Speech Code of American Drag Queens." *Sexuality & Culture* 18.3 (2014): 630-48.

Skeggs, Bev. "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation." *Sociology* 39.5 (2005): 965-82.

Skeggs, Beverley, and Helen Wood. *Reacting to Reality Television : Performance, Audience and Value*. New York: Routledge, 2012.

Smitherman, Geneva. *Black Talk : Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*. Rev. ed ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

Strings, Sabrina, and Long T. Bui. "“She is Not Acting, She is” the Conflict between Gender and Racial Realness on RuPaul's Drag Race." *Feminist Media Studies* 14.5 (2014): 822-36.

Tyler, Imogen, and Bruce Bennett. "‘Celebrity Chav’: Fame, Femininity and Social Class." *European journal of cultural studies* 13.3 (2010): 375-93.

Yep, Gust A. *Queer Theory and Communication : From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline(s)*. Hoboken: Routledge, 2014.

Young, James O. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. 2nd ed ed. Chichester: Wiley, 2008. New Directions in Aesthetics.

Online references

BUILD Series, 2018. “The Queens Of "RuPaul's Drag Race All Stars" Dish Season 4 w/ Carson Kressley.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPoEVnDFmsg Accessed on 11.3.2020

Cunningham, Michael. “The Slap of Love.” *Open City* 1:6 (1998). https://opencity.org/archive/issue-6/the-slap-of-love Accessed on 5.10.2020

Drag 1:1 (1971). New York: Queens’ Liberation Front, 1971 https://archive.org/details/drag11unse/mode/2up

ET Live, 2019. "ET Live at DragCon 2019: RuPaul explains why drag will never be mainstream." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uYRia_vG6S0 Accessed on 11.3.2020

i-D Magazine, 2017. “The Dictionary According to RuPaul’s Drag Race.” https://i-d.vice.com/en_uk/article/wjnqeb/rupaul-drag-race-dictionary Accessed on 5.10.2020

Marie Claire. 2015. “Decoding 'RuPaul's Drag Race': 16 Terms You Need to Know.” http://www.marieclaire.com/culture/news/a13716/rupaul-drag-race-terms-to-know/ Accessed on 5.10.2020

People Magazine. 2016. “Happy Birthday Mama Ru!” https://www.peoplemagazine.co.za/celebrity-news/happy-birthday-mama-ru/ Accessed on 11.3.2020

Ryan, Hugh. “Ballroom Culture’s Rich Alternative to the Trans/Cis Gender Model.” *Slate* 12.8.2016. https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/08/ballroom-cultures-gender-model-offers-rich-alternative-to-cis-trans-division.html Accessed on 5.10.2020

The Guardian. 2018a. “RuPaul: ‘Drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture.” https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/03/rupaul-drag-race-big-f-you-to-male- dominated-culture Accessed on 20.11.2018

The Guardian. 2018b. “How Mariah Carey’s ‘I don’t know her’ became pop’s shadiest power move.” https://www.theguardian.com/music/2018/jul/13/how-mariah-carey-i-dont-know-her-became-pops-shadiest-power-move Accessed on 11.3.2020

Washington Post. 2016. “'RuPaul's Drag Race' is more than a TV show. It's a movement.” https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2016/08/24/rupauls-

drag-race-is-more-than-a-tv-show-its-a-movement/?utm_term=.2574ec863779 Accessed on 11.3.2020

WOWPresents. 2014. “RuPaul's "Oh No She Better Don't" Official Music Video feat. The Cast of Rupaul's Drag Race Season 6.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bHVNduc12PU Accessed on 24.3.2020

WOWPresents. 2019. “What is DragCon.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGftLHO63LY Accessed on 11.3.2020

Cited material

RuPaul's Drag Race Season 6. 2014. *Netflix*

RuPaul's Drag Race: Untucked Season 6. 2014. *Amazon Prime Video*